

ON TEST

DISHWASHERS
CAR GPS SYSTEMS
WALKING POLES
FROZEN VEGETABLES
NOISE-CANCELLING
HEADPHONES

AUGUST 2007
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Eating organic

Is it worth the money?



CHOICE finds the best beer

SAVE ON HOSPITAL INSURANCE

HOW TO: GET CHEAPER PHONE BILLS, BUY A SOFA BED



Jane Mackenzie
Editor

Consumers taken for a ride

It's a sad state of affairs when ads make such confusing claims that the Federal Court ends up deciding which of two competing mobile phone plans is better value for the customer. Or when PhoneChoice, the phone comparison website, tells CHOICE that phone companies' pricing structures for internet and phone 'bundles' are so complex, not even quantitative analysis and computer modelling can successfully compare them.

In many ways, competition in the telecommunications industry has produced good results: prices have fallen and you can tailor what you're paying for to your own needs. But as all consumers know, too much choice defeats the purpose: faced with as many alternatives as we are when choosing a mobile phone plan, most of us throw our hands in the air and give up.

And it's not just the number of plans available that's the problem — their marketing amounts to smoke and mirrors. The ad mentioned above promoted the phone plans in terms of the value (\$xx worth) of calls you could make. But the cost of a call depends on many factors, including its length, the cost per minute, the time you're calling, the flagfall, what kind of phone you're making it to, etc. So unless you have a very exact knowledge of your phone usage and it doesn't vary a lot, choosing between plans based on a dollar amount can be pretty meaningless. This makes it effectively impossible for the average consumer to work out which plan would be better value for them.

We wouldn't mind if we thought it was just genuine competition. But we strongly suspect you're meant to be confused, and the ex-head of NZ Telecom, Teresa Gattung, admitted it in 2006 when she said, "Think about pricing. What has every telco in the world done in the past? It's used confusion as its chief marketing tool." That's not fair competition — it's taking the consumer for a ride. For more, see the article on page 26.

No advertising, no bias ... just reliable, expert advice.

CHOICE is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance your quality of life. It's a Council member of Consumers International.

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We test and rate products and services Our ratings are based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a Best Buy. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted.

Representing your interests We lobby and campaign on behalf of consumers to promote your rights, to influence government policy, and to ensure consumer issues have a high profile in the public arena.

Coming soon ...

Home first aid kits

Do they contain what they need?



Wonder juice

Goji, noni, acai ... helpful or hocus-pocus?



MP3 players

Update of flash and hard disc players.



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Due to rising costs, the price of a one-year CHOICE subscription will rise to \$78/year (\$19.50/qtr) in August 2007. For more, see May 2007, page 6.

Magnetic toy warning

Magnetic toys may be a fun educational tool, but they can kill. The problem toys involve powerful neodymium magnets that are small enough to swallow. The main culprits are pieces like those pictured below, which come from sets where you can build structures from small pieces. Designs vary: some brands use magnets encased in plastic bars, while others have small magnets on the ends of each bar — these can fall out.

If more than one magnet or magnetic piece, or a magnet and metal object such as a ball are swallowed, they can attract each other through opposing walls of the intestine, which can lead to obstruction, tissue death, blood poisoning and/or perforation of the intestines. Symptoms include stomach pains, diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting.

In the US, one toddler has died and at least 42 other children have been admitted for emergency surgery because they've swallowed such magnets. Similar cases have been reported in Denmark and the UK, and the Queensland Injury Surveillance Unit reported 58 magnet-related injuries from 1998 to 2005.

Many of these toys carry a warning saying

they're not suitable for children under three. But if they're given to older children, younger kids may also be at risk from parts left lying around.

And there's another risk presented by these kits: older kids *deliberately* swallowing the magnets and showing off their new party trick — sticking magnets to the outside of their belly, thanks to magnetic forces from within. They can also stick pieces to their lips or tongue to imitate a body piercing.

Toys to look out for include magnetic construction sets, educational kits, jewellery sets, and any toy with small, strong magnets that could come loose and/or be swallowed. Mega Brands recalled millions of Magnetix toy sets in the US; there was a recall in Australia as well, but this only applied where magnets had become dislodged. And there's a recall of a toy of this type in this issue — see page 57.

There's a safety standard for toys like these in the US, but not here. So the best thing to do is supervise your children while they're playing with magnets, and make sure none is left lying around. And if you suspect something has been swallowed, seek urgent medical attention.



These small, strong magnets are the type that do damage if children swallow them.



These magnetic letters aren't such a problem, as the magnets are comparatively weak; nor is the cheap construction set.

SUPPORT FOR UNIT PRICING

Following our article *The whole truth* (CHOICE, April 2007), two major retailers have indicated their support for the introduction of unit pricing in supermarkets in Australia. Unit pricing shows the cost of items per 100 grams, per kilogram or per litre, for example, which makes it much easier to compare prices when you're working out which product is the best value for money.

- WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY is developing systems to introduce unit pricing for what it considers "appropriate" products. The new system is scheduled to start in 2008, but no other details are available at this stage.
- ALDI told us it's very supportive of any push towards unit pricing and hopes it gains momentum in Australia soon. "Unit pricing is already used successfully in other parts of the ALDI international business and we believe it will only be time before it is common practice here in Australia," says the company. "Unit pricing would further illustrate our price competitiveness and show customers just how competitive we are on a gram for gram/unit basis." ALDI thinks the move should be pushed by regulators.

CHOICE has written to fair trading ministers in all states and territories asking them to encourage the industry to develop unit pricing systems. Thanks to those of you who have given your support to our campaign by writing to your local minister.

UPDATE

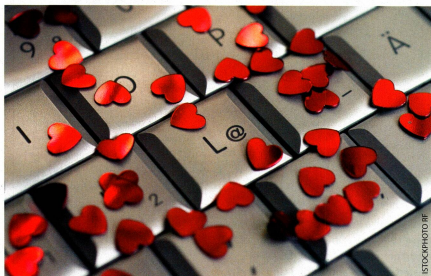
DO NOT CALL REGISTER CHOICE, June 2007

In *CHOICE Cuts* on page 5, we only gave the website for the 'Do Not Call' register, not the free phone number you can call to sign up too. The register enables you to opt out of receiving telemarketing calls. It's 1300 792 958, or go to www.donotcall.gov.au.

CAN YOU HELP?

SWITCHING TO A BETTER DEAL

Have you flicked your bank, insurance company, home loan provider, credit card or other finance company and moved to a better (or worse) deal? We'd love to hear from you for an upcoming article we're researching. Please tell us about your experiences by sending an email to betterdeal@choice.com.au, a fax to 02 9577 3377 (for the attention of the Money Team) or write to Money Team, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Thanks for your help.



Putting love on the line

If you're searching for love, chances are you've considered an online dating service such as RSVP, Lavalife or Match.com — and you're not alone. According to RSVP: "[Currently] there's around four million Australians classified as single... and about 1.3 million of them are online dating."

Internet dating sites cater to people of all ages, but more commonly the 25–40 age bracket. On most sites, sign-up is free and you only start paying when you make contact with others. Some other sites have a monthly rate.

A 2005 UK study of 229 online daters found that, of those who'd met a prospective mate in person, 94% of them had seen that person again and 18% of them had a consequent relationship lasting over a year.

But unfortunately it's not all roses — be aware of internet dating scams and take the necessary precautions to ensure your safety. Here are a few tips from Match.com:

- **Guard your anonymity** Never include your last name, phone number, home address or any identifying information in your profile or initial messages.
- **Chat on the phone** Don't reveal your

number to a stranger. To block your caller ID on any phone, dial 1831 before the number.

- **Meet in a safe place** When meeting for the first time, tell a friend where you'll be and when you'll return. Meet in a public place and take your own car.
- **Be cautious outside your area** If travelling to another city, arrange your own car and hotel room. Don't disclose the name of your hotel and meet in a prearranged, safe place. Also let someone know where you'll be.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade adds the following advice:

- **Never send money to someone you meet online** An internet dating scheme allegedly operating out of Russia has duped several Australians. Once a relationship has been established through the online dating site, the person is asked to send their prospective partner money to travel to Australia. Shortly after the money's received, the relationship is terminated — and the money disappears. Always treat a request for money with extreme scepticism.

Go to the ACCC's www.scamwatch.gov.au for more (look under 'More scams').

WORLD CONSUMER SNAPSHOT

A CLAYTONS BIKINI?

How would you feel if you bought a \$200+ bikini and then were told, when it started disintegrating after just one season's wear, that it's because you've worn it in the sun or water? That's the gist of what a reader of Swiss consumer magazine *J'achète mieux* was told when she returned the expensive swimwear to the distributor — that the breakdown of the elastane fibre could only have been caused by a chemical reaction of the fabric in contact with perspiration, chlorine, seawater or sun products.

"They must really think we're imbeciles," she says in the magazine. "Now, when we buy swimmers, we're not to swim in them, neither in the sea nor the pool, and we mustn't wear them in the sun either because we could sweat or expose them to sun products. Be assured that before I buy ski-wear, I'll make sure it won't get damaged by the cold or snow."

NO TIME TO SEE PATIENTS

A survey by our counterparts in the US revealed that almost half the doctors surveyed (41%) thought their patients waited too long before making an appointment. Perhaps not surprising when you consider that 19% of the patients surveyed said they'd been unable to get an appointment scheduled within a week.

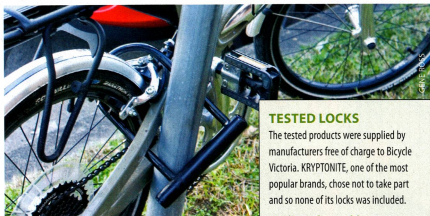
GREENER WITH AGE

The number of environmentally friendly behaviours people say they're performing increases markedly with age, according to a survey for the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation. The survey of more than 1700 NSW residents found that most people say they're taking a range of actions to contribute to the protection and improvement of the environment, but that over-35s are more likely than under-35s to be doing nine out of the 10 things the survey asked about. Water-related issues occupied the top spot for environmental concerns, but climate change and energy issues were growing rapidly in importance.

Bike locks

To protect your bicycle from thieves both opportunist and professional, you need a good lock. There are lots of types to choose from: light cable locks, heavy armoured cable locks and D-locks. Bicycle Victoria recently tested 11 different bike locks to see which are hardest to crack. Here's what they found:

- **Light to medium-duty cables** have a 5–10 mm thick steel cable, often encased in plastic, and usually with an integrated key or combination lock. Bicycle Victoria tested three medium-duty cables with integrated key locks. All could be broken in around 30 seconds or less, using just the most basic tools. These cables will only be a mild deterrent to most thieves.
- **Armoured cables** have an articulated steel sheath around the cable. Four key-locking cables were tested, ranging from 19–25 mm in thickness. These were generally harder to break than the lighter cables, but even the toughest (ABUS) was broken with manual tools in just one minute 17 seconds. Any well-equipped bike thief won't be deterred by these.
- **D-locks**, also called U-locks, have the reputation of being the most difficult to break, though there was a scare in 2004 when KRYPTONITE locks were recalled (apparently they could be cracked with a ballpoint pen). D-locks typically have a 12–15 mm steel



shackle with a locking bar at its base. They're heavier and more unwieldy than cables, but much more secure. The four tested D-locks resisted shearing and cutting, and initially resisted impact attacks too. The BASTA took around four minutes to break with manual tools; the ONGUARD resisted manual tools but was defeated by a portable power tool; and the toughest, the TRELOCK and ABUS, could only be broken with heavy-duty power tools. Faced with locks this tough, most thieves will go looking for easier targets.

- **Locking strategies** Lock the D-lock around your bike's back wheel and frame as well as the parking post, to reduce the space available for levering. A short D-lock around the back wheel and parking post is another good option. And consider teaming your D-lock with a cable lock for front wheel and accessories.

TESTED LOCKS

The tested products were supplied by manufacturers free of charge to Bicycle Victoria. KRYPTONITE, one of the most popular brands, chose not to take part and so none of its locks was included.

Medium-duty cables

BASTA BA21	\$25
ONGUARD Doberman 5028	\$20
TRELOCK SK110	\$25

Armoured cables

ABUS Centuro	\$75
BASTA BA24	\$30
ONGUARD Rottweiler 5026	\$35
TRELOCK KS695	\$70

D-locks

ABUS Sinero	\$80
BASTA RE-2002 (BA14)	\$36
ONGUARD Pitbull Std 5003	\$55
TRELOCK BS400	\$89

More information can be found in the February/March issue of Bicycle Victoria's magazine *Ride On*, and at www.bv.com.au.



Transferring gym memberships

Ever signed up for a gym membership, only to move house or discover that the gym's services don't suit your needs — after the initial cooling-off period? Some gyms impose cancellation fees or require you to pay out your contract. Others let you transfer your membership — but finding someone to take it can be difficult.

Queensland personal trainer Ryan O'Neal talked to many people in this situation when he worked in membership sales at a gym. So he decided to create a website — www.transfermymembership.com — to solve the problem. It was launched in May and enables people across Australia to advertise their gym membership online for a small fee. The site puts people in touch with each other, but then it's up to them to deal with the nitty gritty of the transfer.

Check the small print on your membership contract to make sure your gym permits transfers. Most charge a transfer fee to cover administration costs, but overall this can be a cost-effective way to get out of your contract.

There's more to GreenPower

I read your article on accredited GreenPower (June 2007), and found it by and large to be very helpful. I do have one concern, however. Your results table compares the differences in price, but not the quality of the products. Thus the article expresses surprise at the difference in prices between products of equal accreditation.

It's my understanding that the reason for this is that there are significant differences in how much it costs to produce the electricity — for example, solar costs more to produce than hydro.

And the important element your report misses (if I'm correct) is that there's a significant difference in how much each of the energy sources can contribute to addressing climate change. Solar and wind clearly do cost more, but they're also potentially a much more important part of the solution.

Jeremy Hill

It's true that the cost of various sources of renewable energy (biomass, wind, solar, etc.) varies and this can affect the retail price of GreenPower too. Unfortunately, there wasn't sufficient space in the article to detail the sources for each of the many products on the market.



Some companies let you choose the source of renewable energy, which affects the price you pay. For example, Origin Energy offers a choice of two 100% Accredited GreenPower products: GreenEarth Solar and GreenEarth Wind. GreenSwitch, which sells GreenPower credits, lets you decide the mix of biomass, hydro, wind and solar energy you'd like, and prices vary accordingly.

There's plenty of debate about which form of renewable energy is 'best' for the environment. Even solar and wind energy have critics. The GreenPower scheme is 'best' for the environment. Even solar and wind energy have critics. The GreenPower scheme is 'best' for the environment. Even solar and wind energy have critics. The GreenPower scheme is 'best' for the environment. Find out more at www.greenpower.gov.au.

No raw liver

I read your article on pet food (June 2007) with interest, but was aghast when I saw your recipe for a homemade diet for dogs and cats. It contained raw sheep or beef liver. Hydatids is a most serious disease, and is caught when humans and other animals ingest the tiny eggs of very small hydatid worms, which are hosted by dogs.

It's illegal to feed offal to dogs in Tasmania, which was once heavily infected with hydatids but is now declared hydatid-free. The only cases found in Tasmania in humans now are long-standing cysts from old infections. However, hydatids is still prevalent in mainland Australia. It needs mild, wet climates to exist, so is found in areas such as mid NSW, through the Southern Highlands into Gippsland, and in pockets in WA, but not in desert areas. New cases of hydatids are diagnosed each year in mainland Australia, but it's thought that a great many more go undetected. Younger GPs aren't as aware of the problem as their predecessors were.

The golden rule is: don't feed offal, either raw or cooked, to dogs. The liver, etc, in commercial tinned pet food is treated (cooked) at high

THUMBS UP!

• Robyn Lincoln would like to give a Thumbs-up to SPEAR & JACKSON — "a household name in this country 50 years ago", according to her 82-year-old father. When Bunnings in Queensland was unable to order a new nozzle for his 25-year-old garden spray pump, the Victorian office of the UK-owned company sent him a different nozzle free of charge, and it fits perfectly. "It's wonderful to see that consumer loyalty is so richly rewarded ... and that businesses are willing to go to great lengths for our older citizens and for such a small item," Robyn writes.

temperatures, so is safe, but home-cooked is a risk.

Ivan, Tasmania

Professor David Fraser of Sydney University, who helped with research for the article and supplied the recipe, told us: "The incorporation of liver in the suggested diet was to ensure it contained adequate amounts of all the necessary vitamins, in a way that could be done easily and cheaply by anyone in their own kitchen. I'd presumed that liver sold for human consumption would have been passed by meat inspectors as being free of hydatid cysts.

"It would be possible to replace liver with a multivitamin supplement to achieve the same end, but this would add to the complexity of preparing the diet."

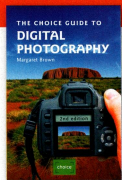
Although feeding offal to dogs is only illegal in Tasmania, if you live elsewhere in the country and are concerned about hydatids, it's wise to omit the raw liver and add a vitamin supplement to the pet food diet printed in our June issue. For more information on hydatids, contact your state government department of agriculture or your local vet.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. We're also keen to hear about positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or service provider. Address these letters to *Thumbs up* at the address on page 2.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Jeremy Hill, receives *The CHOICE Guide to Digital Photography* (2nd edition), or any other book of his choice from the list on choice.com.au/books.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.



IN A NUTSHELL

- The jury's still out on whether organic produce tastes better or is better for you, but one thing's certain: it usually costs more.
- The only way to be sure you're really buying organic is to buy certified products — see page 13 for which logos to look for.

PAUL SANTELMANN/ALTA HOUSE

The rise

Going organic is much easier now you can buy it in supermarkets, but is it worth the extra money?

Not too long ago you had to go to special shops if you wanted organic food. Now you can find plenty in supermarkets, but mostly you'll pay a pretty high premium over the cost of standard produce. Is it really worth it?

The answer's not clear-cut: it's 'sometimes', 'maybe' and even 'we don't know'. While organic farming can certainly be better for the environment (see *What's organic?*, far right), the jury's still out on whether organic food is more nutritious and tastes better. Research is ongoing and it's not an area where there are many certainties.

It's possible organic fruit and veg contain less water and more concentrated vitamins, minerals and other plant chemicals. Circumstantial evidence suggests they could have more beneficial phytochemicals, such as antioxidants, because plants produce them to defend themselves, and without pesticides to protect them, organic plants might produce more. But the research is complex and results aren't definitive.

For example, research from the US and Europe suggests good things about the nutritional value of some organic animal produce. However, it's not clear whether these possible differences translate to often very different Australian farming practices.

Here we take a look at some typical organic foods now available in many local supermarkets — how much more you'll pay and what we do know about any differences between the organic and standard versions — to give you an idea of when it might be worth paying more.

CERTIFIED PRODUCE ONLY

'Certified organic' produce is the best guarantee you'll get what you pay for. Wherever we talk about organic food in the article, we mean certified organic.

and rise of organics



Milk

Typical price for 1 L

Organic brands \$1.70 to \$2.50

Leading brand \$1.80 to \$2.30

Organic cows have free access to pasture and their feed isn't treated with pesticides or herbicides. The animals aren't routinely treated with other things like antibiotics

(see *Beef*, page 10, for more).

Research from Europe suggests full-fat organic milk contains higher levels of omega-3 fats, as well as the fat-soluble vitamins and antioxidants beta-carotene and vitamin E, compared with regular milk. However, the situation in Australia may not be the same: non-organic European cows don't graze on pasture much (particularly in winter), while organic cows get free access to it. Organic or not, most Aussie cows spend most of their time on pasture. Australian research is needed.

In the US there are concerns about possible effects of growth hormones given to non-organic cows to increase milk production. These hormones aren't permitted in Australia at all, so it's not an issue here.

Butter

Typical price for 250 g

Organic \$3.50

Leading brand \$1.80

Organic butter is made from organic milk, so the comments about milk (see above) also apply.



Chicken

Typical price for a whole 1 kg chicken

Organic \$10 to \$12

Standard \$4.50 to \$6.50

Typical price for 1 kg breast fillets

Organic \$28 to \$33

Standard \$12.50 to \$15

What's organic?

Organic agriculture methods can be better for the environment than conventional methods because they don't use synthetic chemicals like pesticides or herbicides. There are also no genetically modified inputs, and the philosophy incorporates a respect for the natural order of seasons and animal behaviour. Organic animals are free-range and there's no use of growth promoters such as steroids or hormones. And you may find a wider range of varieties of fruit and vegetables than with conventional produce.

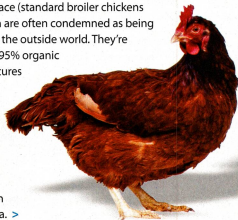
However, organic produce isn't guaranteed free of all chemical residues (they can drift in from other areas or persist in the soil, for example). But independent testing consistently finds fewer, and lower, levels of residues of pesticides, herbicides and other farming chemicals than in conventional produce. That said, the jury is still out about whether it's in fact safer than conventional produce. And on the global scale, there's debate about whether organic agriculture can produce enough food to feed the world.

One thing's certain: organic food does cost more — our survey of supermarkets found it often costs two or even three times as much.

Certified organic chicken is typically twice the price of regular chicken. For this the chickens are free-range: they get much more space (standard broiler chickens are kept in sheds, which are often condemned as being crowded) and access to the outside world. They're

fed a minimum of 95% organic feed, graze on pastures that aren't treated

with pesticides or herbicides, and the chickens' feed isn't genetically modified. Plus there's no use of antibiotics. Growth hormones aren't used in any chickens in Australia. >



< Eggs

Typical price for one dozen 55–60 g eggs

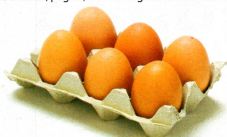
Organic \$8 to \$9

Leading brand (cage) \$4 to \$4.20

Leading brand (free-range) \$5.50 to \$7.50

Organic eggs are free-range, which means no cages, but they're even more expensive than ordinary free-range

— see *Chicken*, page 9, for how organic chickens are raised.



Beef

Typical price for 1 kg scotch fillet

Organic \$30.50 to \$35

Standard \$20 to \$27

Typical price for 1 kg mince

Organic \$14 to \$15

Standard \$10 to \$12

Organic beef, like much of the beef cattle in Australia, is free-range rather than from a feed lot. However, for organic beef, the pasture and any other feed used must be organic and not grown with pesticides or herbicides.

Unlike most regular Australian beef, organic cattle can't be treated with growth-promoting hormones. The use of growth hormones in meat production is a matter of contention and international debate. The Australian government's position is that they're unlikely

to be a health risk when properly used; the European Union disagrees and has banned them. There's a sophisticated control system in Australia to ensure no growth hormones are used in beef exported to Europe.

Teabags

Typical price for 50 bags

Organic brands \$2.40 to \$4.80

Leading brand \$2.80

CHOICE tested teas for pesticides in 2003, and



all the varieties that claimed to be organic got the all-clear. However, we found traces of pesticides in nearly 40% of the tea samples, of which a few were much higher than the maximum residue limit (and residues of 17 pesticides not registered for use in foods in Australia). Green and herbal teas had greater numbers and levels of pesticides in general than black teas.

Chocolate

Typical price for 100 g block (high in cocoa solids)

Organic brands \$4 to \$6

Leading brand \$3.30

The number and type of additives are restricted in organic chocolate, and typically it's high in cocoa solids (at least 70% for dark chocolate). However, the ingredients are very similar to other upmarket high-cocoa-solids chocolate. Some cheap choc bars contain unhealthy trans fats, which aren't permitted in organic foods.

And there's more to chocolate than conventional vs organics: as a letter to CHOICE (May 2007) pointed out, child slave labour has been central to the chocolate

trade and it's worth looking out for brands that don't use it.

Cereals

Typical price for 750 g wheat biscuits

Organic \$4.20

to \$4.60

Leading brand \$3.90

to \$4.00

Not all organics are more expensive than standard. For breakfast wheat biscuits, there's little or no price difference. Organic cornflakes and muesli usually had greater differences.

You can expect organic cereals to have no artificial additives and to be made from organically grown grains and other ingredients.

Honey

Typical price for 500 g

Organic \$4.60

to \$7.40

Leading brand

\$5.30 to \$5.50

Bees fly — it seems obvious, but as a result organic

beehives must be at least five kilometres from conventional crops/orchards and pollution sources such as livestock dips, urban areas, garbage dumps, contaminated water,



GEOFF AMBLER

BISCUITS

We didn't find any organic biscuits in supermarkets, but some brands are available in healthfood stores. A well-known one is Duchy Originals, imported from the UK, but at around \$10 to \$12 for a 250 g packet, they're definitely a special-occasion purchase.

Apart from the usual organic farming benefits, the main thing organic biscuits offers is no artificial additives or hydrogenated fat, which often contains trans fat that's bad for your heart.

industrial sites, golf courses and genetically modified crops.

There are also other requirements relating to factors like bee welfare and the materials that hives can be made from.

Apples

Typical price for 1 kg

Organic \$5 to \$8

Standard \$2 to \$5

Organic apples are anywhere between one-and-a-half and three times more expensive than standard apples. There's very limited evidence, but some suggests organic apples could have an edge in taste.

If you're keen to reduce your exposure to synthetic chemicals, though, organic apples could be worth considering. The (very limited) Australian testing for pesticides and herbicides has found residues on apples, although, as on other fruit, almost always at less than the allowable limits. One WA study found at least one low-level residue on around half the apples sampled.

The 2003 Australian Total Diet Survey (ATDS), which looked at residues, also suggests around half of the conventional apples had one residue or more.

Strawberries

Organic strawberries weren't in season when we did our price survey (May); as we went to press they were starting to become available from Queensland. We found them online and in speciality shops for \$9 to \$10. At the same time conventional strawberries were around \$4.50 per punnet.

The 2003 ATDS found the fruit with the highest residue levels was strawberries. The survey found at least one residue on two thirds of strawberry samples.

Some studies suggest organic strawberries may have more antioxidants and one study found them to be redder and sweeter, so you could give them a try — if you can find them at a reasonable price.



Carrots

Typical price for 1 kg

Organic \$4.30 to \$5.00

Standard \$1.20 to \$2

Organic carrots are quite a bit more expensive than standard ones — over twice as much. On the synthetic chemicals front, though, regular carrots seem to have few pesticide residues: the 2003 ATDS found residues in only one of 21 samples, and this was backed up in the most recent Victorian survey (nine out of 10 samples were residue-free). However, a WA survey found only 50% of conventional samples to be residue-free.



Tomatoes

Typical price for 250 g

cherry tomatoes

Organic \$4 to \$6

Standard \$3 to \$4

Perhaps surprisingly, organic cherry tomatoes don't always cost more than standard ones. As for residue concerns, the 2003 ATDS found at least one in five samples had at least one residue.

Some studies suggest organic tomatoes are more concentrated (which could improve

the flavour) and have more of some beneficial phytochemicals and vitamins.

Potatoes

Typical price for 2 kg

Organic \$6 to \$8

Standard \$3.90 to \$5

Recent Australian residue surveys have found almost no pesticide residues in conventional potatoes, so paying extra for organic may not be worthwhile in this respect.

Some preliminary studies suggest organic potatoes have higher levels of some vitamins and minerals. And in one recent study, people could taste the difference as long as the potatoes weren't peeled. However, they tasted somewhat more bitter and earthy — it's not known which was preferred. >



All our prices were collected in 20 Sydney supermarkets in May 2007. They may change depending on the season.

Organic home delivery

◀ If you like the idea of going organic but aren't keen on buying your fruit and veg at a supermarket, an online organic home box delivery service could be for you.

We asked three families in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane to give it a go for four weeks — here are their experiences.

GREEN LINE ORGANIC DIRECT

Sharon from Melbourne (below) tried a weekly box from GREEN LINE ORGANIC DIRECT. With three teenage children, she found having a box of home-delivered fruit and veg very convenient, but was frustrated by the surprise factor of not knowing what they'd receive. "My family's likes and dislikes didn't always match well with the week's box. We eat lots of carrots — raw and cooked — and the box couldn't keep up. There was plenty of variety, but not all the things I would usually buy," she says. "Organic fruit and veg is more expensive per kilo, but I was pleasantly surprised with the quantity I got for \$55 each week."

Sometimes things didn't look as perfect as regular veges, but the taste and quality were generally good. However, she found it a challenge to convince her teenagers that slightly strange-shaped snow peas were fine.

Sharon was impressed with the helpful website, which had recipe ideas and lots of information. She doesn't usually buy organic fruit and veg, but says that now she'll be more inclined to do so. She won't be continuing with delivered boxes, though: "I still prefer to look over and select my own fruit and veg — what I buy depends on what's still in the crisper from last week, family fads, and what's fresh and good value."

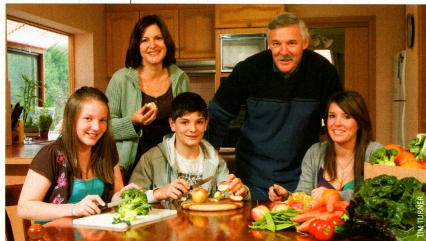
Box Box of the week (\$35/\$45/\$55/\$70/\$100); free delivery on Melbourne metro standing orders and Melbourne metro orders over \$100.

Website www.greenlinedelivery.com.au

Delivery area Melbourne on Thursday/Friday and major Victorian country areas on Friday.

Payment They phone you to organise payment: credit card, BPAY or money order.

"Organic fruit and veg is more expensive per kilo, but I was pleasantly surprised with the quantity I got for \$55 each week."



"The same fruit and vegetables appeared from week to week in large amounts, so I was fairly quickly overloaded with silverbeet, potatoes, oranges, apples, onions and carrots."

FARM FRESH ORGANICS

Robyn from Brisbane (above) sampled a weekly box from FARM FRESH ORGANICS. She and her husband and their teenage family are keen organic buyers — they have a local supplier Robyn trusts, who sells organics at prices often similar to those she'd pay for conventional fruit and veg at her local supermarket.

She thought the mixed box from FARM FRESH ORGANICS was easy to order, as well as fresh and good value for money, but found the fixed contents of the weekly box something of a challenge: "The same fruit and vegetables appeared from week to week in large amounts, so I was fairly quickly overloaded with silverbeet, potatoes, oranges, apples, onions and carrots. Our fridge quickly became a version of *The Day of the Triffids*."

Robyn thinks ordering item by item from the website would make more sense for her family, allowing her to buy exactly what she wants in the amounts she needs that week. "You can ask for up to three items to be excluded from your box, but not for anything specific to be added. But it's a good way of getting vegies you might not usually buy and experimenting with how to cook them."

In the end, Robyn decided not to continue with the delivery service: "I've got a local market supplier that's great value, and I know from experience I can rely on the quality."

Box Small (\$35); medium (\$50); large (\$70), plus delivery. Minimum order \$50.

Website www.freshorganics.com.au

Delivery area Brisbane, Ipswich and surrounding areas, delivered on Thursday and Friday.

Payment Direct deposit or credit card — you call them to arrange it.

ABUNDANT ORGANICS

Elisabeth and Greg from Sydney (right) have four small — and hungry — boys under seven. They tried a weekly box from ABUNDANT ORGANICS. "We're pretty busy, as you can imagine," says Elisabeth, "and home-delivered anything is a great time saver. We were really happy with the convenience and quality, but we're a big family, we rarely eat out, and the boys are all keen fruit eaters. Even though I was getting the biggest mixed box on offer (\$100), I still had to buy extra fruit each week — a rockmelon can disappear just for the boys' dessert."

The family doesn't usually buy organic fruit and veg, although they like the idea: "If money was no object, we'd continue with the deliveries — it was a real time saver and I like the idea of buying organic and in season. But I usually spend about \$50 on fruit and veg and buy the things that are the best value that week. This was great, but seemed to be about twice the cost," concludes Elisabeth.

Box Mixed boxes (\$35/\$45/\$60/\$75/\$100), free delivery (Sydney metro).
Website www.abundantorganics.com.au

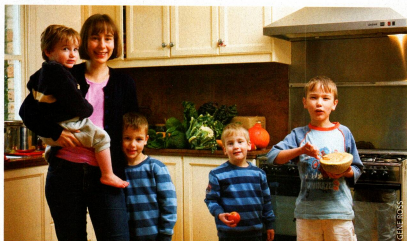
Delivery area Sydney, Blue Mountains, Nepean; Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, depending on area.

Payment Online by credit card.

What to consider

There are lots of home-delivery fruit and veg businesses on the net — some are organic, some not. To find one that suits you:

- If you want organic produce, check their policy on certified vs non-certified — certified organics are your best guarantee of getting what you're paying for (see *Is it organic?*, below).
- Some may use more local sources and others source



"Even though I was getting the biggest mixed box on offer, I still had to buy extra fruit each week — a rockmelon can disappear just for the boys' dessert."

nationally and internationally. It will affect the variety available as well as the distance the food has to travel.

- Check the variety of box sizes. Some services have one size, others several. Some let you request certain things be left out or added if available. With some you may be able to see what's in the box before you order, with others it's a total surprise.
- Check if you can choose your own individual order rather than a fixed box — all the families who tried boxes for us thought this would suit them better.
- Check the delivery areas and days/times — some are more flexible than others.
- Check their payment method: some have secure online credit card payments, others will call you after you place your first order to arrange a payment method (cheque, direct deposit, credit card over the phone and so on).

Is it organic?

The organic industry is currently in effect regulated by the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS), because exported organic foods must meet AQIS's National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce. It has accredited a number of organisations as qualified to certify organic foods. The government does this to ensure Australia's organic export markets, but Australian consumers benefit indirectly.

There have been debates recently about how much flexibility is permitted in the standards, and whether food that can't be exported should be allowed for domestic consumption in certain circumstances. They serve to highlight the urgent need to develop a domestic standard and enforcement framework for organic produce sold to Australian consumers — CHOICE is keen to see this happen.

In the meantime, certified organic produce is still the best guarantee currently available. If you buy produce without a logo, you don't know what you're getting. You may see other certified organic logos on imported foods, but look for these schemes' labels on local produce:

- **Australian Certified Organic** (Biological Farmers of Australia)
07 3350 5716; www.aco.net.au
- **Bio-Dynamic Research Institute** (BDRI)
03 5966 7333; www.demeter.org.au
- **National Association for Sustainable Agriculture, Australia** (NASAA)
08 8370 8455; www.nasaa.com.au
- **Organic Food Chain** (OFC)
07 4637 2600;
www.organicfoodchain.com.au
- **Organic Growers of Australia** (OGA)
02 6622 0100;
www.organicgrowers.org.au
- **Safe Food Queensland**
07 3253 9800;
www.safefood.qld.gov.au
- **Tasmanian Organic-Dynamic Producers Cooperative** (TOP)
03 6363 5162



CERTIFICATION NO XXXX
**AUSTRALIAN
CERTIFIED
ORGANIC**



NASAA
certified organic
AQIS and IFOAM Accredited



OGA Certified
organic

safe:food
queensland





Buying tickets on eBay

Is it worth the risk?

IN A NUTSHELL

- Some events in Queensland and Victoria are covered by anti-scalping laws — don't buy secondhand tickets for them on the net.
- For other tickets, do some homework about the terms and conditions that apply to them before buying them over eBay.

Just missed out on a ticket to your favourite band? Don't have the time or energy to stand in line for grand final tickets? Sporting fans, theatre-goers and music lovers who miss out on tickets to a big event are no longer resorting to haggling with touts outside performance venues. Instead they're heading online and bidding for the highly prized tickets on eBay, often making a new generation of scalpers rich in the process. But is it really safe?

Increasingly both event organisers and governments are attempting to thwart online scalpers by imposing fines and/or cancelling their tickets. Unfortunately this can also leave fans frustrated and out of pocket. Here's a few tips on how to avoid being ripped off if you miss out on buying tickets first-hand.

Tickets to avoid

Currently only certain events in Queensland and Victoria are subject to anti-scalping legislation. CHOICE doesn't recommend buying scalpers' tickets to any of the events covered by these laws. eBay also provides a warning on its site to buyers before they buy tickets to these events.

Queensland is the only state to impose a blanket ban on ticket scalping for events held at certain government-owned venues. These include the Gabba, Suncorp Stadium, the Brisbane Entertainment Centre, Dairy Farmers Stadium, the Queensland

Sport and Athletics Centre, the Sleeman Sports Complex and Skilled Park. The law, which came into effect in December last year, mandates fines of up to \$1500 for anyone who resells tickets at more than 10% above their original price. And it's not only the seller of the tickets who's punished — the buyer can also be fined up to \$375, as well as losing their money and finding their tickets useless.

The fines apply whether or not the buyers and/or sellers are residents of Queensland. If a ticket for one of these events has been spotted on eBay, the police will contact the site, the ticket will be removed and the details of the seller passed to the police.

The Victorian government passed laws in 2002 that outlaw ticket scalping at some popular sporting events. The government decides which events are to be protected under the legislation and to date they've included the AFL Grand Final, the Commonwealth Games and this year's World Swimming Championships. Scalpers face fines of up to \$6445 and anyone who buys an illegal ticket can be denied access to the event.

eBay says it works with the Victorian government with regard to these events and will remove tickets from the site if advised to do so by the government. A similar proposal was introduced into the South Australian parliament in 2005 but was rejected.

Ticketing wars

Aside from the limited protection offered by these states, promoters of major events have also tried to thwart ticket scalpers in a number of ways. Perhaps the most controversial of these was Cricket Australia's decision last year to cancel more than 1000 Ashes tickets it suspected were going to be sold by scalpers. A number of these had been traded on eBay.

However, when Creative Festival Entertainment (CFE), promoter of the Big Day Out, tried to stop tickets for this year's event being snapped up by scalpers, eBay took it to court — and won. CFE had printed warnings on the tickets that any resold for profit would be cancelled. The court found this was

deceptive and misleading, as the company couldn't possibly track down all the tickets that had been resold for profit.

But this doesn't mean promoters are now powerless to take action against scalpers. The Australian Rugby Union (ARU) has printed a warning on tickets to the recent international rugby series, saying that it "has the right to" deny admission if tickets have been resold at a premium, sold through a broker or agent or been advertised for resale on the internet (whether at a premium or not). The ARU has a similar policy for all tickets issued on its behalf. Despite this, rugby tickets can still be found on eBay, albeit with a warning about the ARU's terms and conditions.

So what does all this mean for diehard fans willing to pay over the odds? CHOICE recommends finding out the particular terms and conditions for each event before buying tickets online. If they aren't available on eBay, go to the promoter's website. At least that way you'll be fully aware of the risks of your purchase and can decide whether it's worth it.

Tips for buying on eBay

If you do decide to buy tickets on eBay, here are a few things to keep in mind.

- Do a search using a combination of keywords in order to find all the available tickets for the event. Check the 'Completed listings' box on the left-hand side of the page so you can also see what other tickets have sold for. The sold tickets appear in green and the available ones in red.
- Check who the seller is. Every seller on eBay has a feedback score. The higher the score, the more experience they've had selling on the site. More

importantly, the 'positive rating' lets you know the percentage of feedback that's been positive. Be wary of anything under 95%.

- Also read the feedback comments carefully. These give you an idea about previous buyers' experiences with the seller and let you know what to expect.
- If you're unsure about anything, ask the seller questions via the eBay mail link. It's important to know which payment options the seller will accept and how they intend to get the tickets to you.
- Don't buy tickets unless they have plenty of time to arrive before the event. You need to include time for the payment to clear and potential postage delays.
- Have your tickets sent by Registered Post. This is usually insured for up to \$100 in case the tickets get lost in the mail (within Australia only). You can also pay extra for additional insurance.

If something goes wrong

If you don't receive the tickets you've paid for or if they turn out to be fakes, it may be possible to get your money back. Following recent changes to the Buyer Protection Program, if you pay via PayPal you can be reimbursed up to \$3000 if certain conditions are met. First the seller's listings have to be eligible, which means they need to have a feedback rating of at least 50 and 98% of the feedback is positive. Under the new scheme, if you buy from a seller with a feedback rating of less than 50, you may still be covered for up to \$400.

If a seller qualifies for Buyer Protection you'll see a small PayPal symbol next to their listing. You also need to file a claim with PayPal within 45 days of payment. eBay no longer provides any protection for items that aren't bought using PayPal. ■

LOW-TECH SCALPING

So what about scalping the old-fashioned way? Is it a good idea to buy tickets from guys in dark coats skulking around outside the venue?

The Queensland legislation outlawing ticket scalping at some venues (see far left) also applies to touts selling tickets outside those venues. Buyers of the tickets can also be fined under this law.

Some councils have by-laws mandating fines for scalpers caught selling tickets outside venues, and some venues also have their own regulations to control scalping.

Generally it's not a good idea to buy these tickets, as there's always a risk they're not genuine and you'll be left with useless tickets and no way to get your money back.

Other ways to get tickets

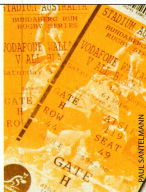
- Premium ticket sites, such as preferredseating.com.au and bluetix.com.au, only sell tickets for the best seats in the house and claim to secure tickets before the public on-sale date.
- Try contacting supporters' clubs or fan sites. They often have an email forum where you can ask if anyone has tickets to sell or, for sporting events, you can see if any season ticket holders are unable to use their tickets for a particular game.
- Some credit card companies offer cardholders access to tickets before they're released to the general public.
- Book a hospitality package. A number of companies offer travel and/or hospitality packages to major events. The package often includes tickets to the event, accommodation and transport, but can be an expensive option.

Paid double, but worth it

David Payne bought tickets for an international rugby test match on eBay. He paid double the face value for the tickets but says it was worth it. "I missed out on getting tickets and I really wanted to go, so I was willing to pay the extra," he says.

David had heard the tickets could be cancelled if they were traced to the internet site but decided it was worth the risk. "The seller gave me the row number the seats were in but not the actual seat numbers, so hopefully they couldn't be cancelled," he says. He felt pretty confident after reading the seller's positive feedback and asking him a couple of questions.

"I'd definitely do it again if there was something I really wanted to go to," he says.



"I'd definitely do it again if there was something I really wanted to go to."

Cheap chat

Cut your phone costs with Skype.

Using the internet to make phone calls can slash your phone bill, especially if you regularly make long-distance calls, and it's easy to do with the popular free software called Skype.

Skype works by transmitting your voice across your broadband internet connection rather than using your telephone line. To get started, all you need is the free Skype software on your PC (from www.skype.com) and a microphone and headset. You can even use a webcam to make face-to-face video calls. The calls are free to anyone using the Skype software almost anywhere in the world. In this way, Skype is similar to several other instant messaging programs. Skype also encrypts all calls, chats and file transfers to keep them private.

The software lets you add people to your personal contact list and you can see when they're online or offline or busy. You can organise contacts in groups, such as friends, family or work. If you share a group, every member can see when a new person joins.

Skype takes this idea further than just

PC-to-PC chat, though. You can also call non-Skype users on their normal landline or mobile phone at cheap per-minute rates (using the SkypeOut service), and even let others call you from normal landline telephones and mobile phones (using the SkypeIn service). These services cost money, however, and to use them you'll first need to buy Skype Credit via the program itself or the Skype website.

The minimum Skype Credit purchase is \$16 and the credit expires after 180 days of inactivity. A SkypeIn number includes voicemail and costs \$24 for three months and \$80 for 12 months.

What's free and what's not

Once you have an internet connection and the Skype software, here's what you can do free with other Skype users:

- Voice calls.
- Video calls.
- One-to-one and group chats.
- Conference calls.
- Send files and photos.

EMERGENCY CALLS

Skype isn't a replacement for your ordinary telephone and can't be used for emergency calls or in a power outage.

- Forward calls to other users.
- **Skype Find** lets you search for local businesses and recommend your favourites to the Skype community.

The following Skype features come at a price, but can still be cheap compared to landline and mobile costs.

- **SkypeIn** gives you a number your friends can call from any phone. You answer the call on your Skype system.
- **SkypeOut** lets you call from Skype to landlines and mobile phones.
- **Skype Voicemail** takes messages for you when you're offline or busy.
- **Skype SMS** lets you send SMS messages to mobile phones.
- **Send Money** lets users transfer funds to each other using the PayPal service.
- **Skype Prime Beta** lets you earn money by charging other Skype users for advice.

For greater convenience and sound quality, rather than having to use your PC and a headset for Skype, you can buy a dedicated Skype-compatible handset that looks and works just like a standard phone. You can even buy a dual-purpose handset that functions as a standard telephone as well as a Skype phone. Skype-compatible phones are becoming available from many major technology brands, such as Uniden, Philips, Logitech, Linksys, Netgear and Panasonic.

Some of these phones don't even require you to have your PC turned on, instead connecting directly to your broadband modem or router.

To try Skype, download the free software from www.skype.com. The site will detect whether you're on a Mac or PC and take you to the appropriate download page. After installing Skype, a setup wizard will take you through the steps to set up a new user account, including choosing a unique Skype name and password. ■



GENE ROSS



Health cover check

Another year, another premium increase —
is your hospital policy still a good deal?

It's important to review your health cover annually to make sure your policy still gives you the cover you need. CHOICE's range of Best Buys can help you find a suitable hospital cover policy that'll save you hundreds of dollars.

Compared to similar hospital cover policies, our Best Buys can save you on average up to (prices shown are for family cover):

- \$710 on a full-cover policy without an excess.
- \$540 for a full-cover policy with up to \$500 annual excess.
- \$700 for full cover or cover that's limited for a set time, with up to \$1000 excess.

For what you get with full cover, a limited policy and other types of hospital insurance, see *What type of cover's for me?*, page 19.

Cost up, cover down

Health insurance premiums on average went up by 4.5% this year, which means there's been a staggering 47.3% increase since 2001.

Over the same period there were also decreases in cover. Take, for example, Ian, 59, and his wife Lyn, 57, from the NSW Central Coast: "This year our rates have increased by \$9.75 per month, and our policy now

restricts cover for hip and knee replacements.

We haven't used this yet but my wife has a very sore knee and it may be one of the things we need to use later on. It seems as we get older the cover gets less and I'm not sure whether it's really worth keeping it any more," says Ian.

While Ian and Lyn's policy no longer covers them for a hip or knee replacement in a private hospital, they're still covered if they go to a public hospital as a private patient. This means, though, that they won't be able to jump the waiting list. Depending on the hospital and doctor, they could easily have to wait more than 12 months for a knee replacement in NSW.

Over the last few years, some funds have introduced policies with even worse restrictions: they totally exclude some procedures such as heart or eye surgery.

However, it's not all bad news; under new legislation that came into effect on 1 April 2007, health funds can now cover a new range of services.

New services covered

Traditionally, private health insurance covered in-hospital treatments under hospital insurance policies and other treatments not covered by Medicare, such as optical or dental care, under 'extras' ('ancillary') policies. >

IN A NUTSHELL

- Use our Best Buys to give your hospital insurance policy a health check. Compared to similar hospital cover policies, CHOICE's Best Buys can save you on average \$540 up to \$710 a year, depending on the amount of cover and the excess or co-payment you pay.
- New legislation allows health funds to cover new types of treatments, and especially to give chronically ill people more alternatives.

< Under the new legislation, they can now cover a whole range of out-of-hospital treatments under an existing or a newly designed policy. New types of services covered can include:

- **Out-of-hospital provision of services** such as chemotherapy at home. For privately insured patients, treatments like chemotherapy were traditionally only covered in hospital even if safe and suitable out-of-hospital options existed. That's no longer the case.

For example, the first service for chemotherapy in the home for privately insured cancer patients began in 2006 in SA. It gives patients and their doctor the option to decide whether it's more suitable for them to receive chemotherapy in their own home or in a hospital setting. Under the new legislation, such services are expected to become more common.

- **Services substituting for hospitalisation** — for example, early discharge programs combined with nursing care at home providing wound dressing for patients recovering from an operation. This can also include midwives providing post-natal services and nurses treating bedsores.

- **Disease management programs** for people with a chronic illness, such as diabetes or heart disease. Over the last few years, a number of funds have introduced programs to help chronically ill people to better manage their health and limit the amount of time they need to spend in hospital. For example, AUSTRALIAN UNITY gives members who have been hospitalised for coronary heart disease access to individual telephone coaching over a six-month period following their return from hospital. The program is offered at no extra cost as a benefit under private hospital cover.

- **Prevention and support programs** for people at high risk of developing a chronic disease. For example, HBA supports a study by Monash University that provides a blood test designed to detect early signs of

heart failure, and offers members aged over 60 the chance to participate in the screening program. Anyone found to have the condition will receive information and guidance about prevention and early treatment.

A number of funds have introduced free online health information. For example, MBF offers online health and lifestyle assessment, including guidelines on topics such as alcohol intake and blood pressure, and promotes awareness about a range of health and wellbeing issues.

- Traditionally **single parents** paid the same premium as families or couples. The new rules now enable health funds to discount policies for single parents. Discounts vary from fund to fund and policy to policy so if this affects you, shop around for a good deal.

Do you need a new policy?

It's expected to take some time for all health funds to develop new policies that include the new services. However, we talked to some large private health insurance funds (HBA, HBF, MBF, MEDIBANK PRIVATE and MUTUAL COMMUNITY) and all said some new services are now covered under some or all of their hospital insurance policies, without members needing to take out a new policy.

So if you're interested in out-of-hospital services, preventative treatment and health management programs, and/or suffer from a chronic disease such as a heart condition or diabetes, contact your health fund to check whether it has a program or policy available that would suit your needs.

CHOICE's verdict

- Broader health cover gives more options to people who can afford private health insurance. The new rules especially give chronically ill people more alternatives. The move to focusing on preventative health makes sense, as does the provision of services outside a hospital setting if the service is safe, suitable and preferred by the patient.
- It will take some time to fully assess the new services and to see if they have any effect on funds in terms of premium increases.
- One thing hasn't changed: you still won't be able to claim on your private hospital insurance for the cost gap between out-of-hospital services that are covered by Medicare, but provided by specialists and GPs who charge more than the Medicare Schedule Fee.
- And what about people who can't afford private health cover? CHOICE is concerned about a further disparity developing between privately insured and public patients. CHOICE wants the government to introduce more preventative health services for people *without* private health cover, so that they're not disadvantaged. >



What type of cover's for me?

You can choose various different levels of hospital cover, and also whether to pay an **excess or co-payment** in order to bring down your premium price. An excess means you pay a certain amount (such as \$500) towards the cost of your treatment, usually once per hospital stay; with a co-payment you pay an amount (for example \$50 a day) for a certain number of days each hospital stay. You can usually choose different levels of each, and your premium price will be lower the higher the amount you pick.

You'd go for an excess or co-payment if you had no reason to expect you'd need to be admitted to hospital in the next year — in other words, you're taking a gamble on higher future expenses in order to reduce the premium you pay now.

CHOICE's Best Buys (see the table, page 20) give you a choice between various different levels of cover and excess. They're all based on family cover, but single cover premiums are usually half the family premium cost.

Full cover, no excess

All procedures are covered in a private hospital after you've been a member for the normal waiting periods, which are 12 months for pre-existing conditions and childbirth (obstetrics) and two months for anything else. You don't pay any excess. This is a good option if you expect to use your hospital policy in the near future: for example, you're planning to start a family or expect you may need treatment such as a hip replacement.

Full cover with \$500 excess

All procedures are covered as above, but with an excess or co-payment of a maximum of \$500 per year per family in total. For example, a Best Buy policy might have a \$250 excess that applies twice per family per year, or a \$50 co-payment that applies up to 10 times per family per year.

These policies are a good option if you want full cover when you need treatment but are happy to pay part of your costs yourself in exchange for a lower premium. If you end up not needing to make a claim and so never pay the excess, usually within one or two years your saving on the difference in premium cost



between this cover and the same cover with no excess will be at least equivalent to the excess.

Full or limited cover with \$1000 excess

For our Best Buys, this category includes two kinds of policy:

- Full-cover policies with a \$1000 excess or co-payment per family per year. If you don't expect to need hospital treatment and can afford \$1000 if you do, you can save even more money on premiums.
- Policies that limit your cover for a set period (called a benefit limitation period), also with a \$1000 excess or co-payment. Some policies limit your cover for an amount of time, or forever, in exchange for a lower premium. One of our Best Buys in this category has a benefit limitation period: for the first 12 months you're only covered as a private patient in a public hospital (not in a private hospital) for some procedures. After this, the policy fully covers you for treatment in a private hospital, and if you haven't needed treatment for any of those procedures in the meantime, you've saved even more money on your premium.

Cheapest policy available

These Best Buy policies are chosen purely on price. Some or most procedures may be limited — your cover won't pay for them in a private hospital, only when you're a private patient in a public hospital, which means you can't jump the waiting list. These policies are suitable

if you only want private health insurance to keep your Lifetime Cover rating and/or want to avoid paying the Medicare surcharge for high income earners:

- **Lifetime Health Cover** gives you a Lifetime Cover 'rating' based on the age you take out hospital insurance, and penalises people who take it out later in life by charging them higher premiums. If you don't join before the first of July immediately following your 31st birthday, you pay a 2% surcharge each year you wait, up to a maximum surcharge of 70%. For example, if you join at 45 you pay 30% more than someone who joined at 30.

So taking out the cheapest possible hospital insurance when you're 30 (and probably don't expect to use it) means you'll avoid higher premiums when you're older and might need it more (for having a baby, say).

The new rules now say that after you've paid the surcharge for 10 years, your premiums revert to the normal premium paid by people who joined before their 31st birthday.

- **Medicare surcharge** single people earning more than \$50,000 and couples/families with incomes over \$100,000 (plus \$1500 for each child after the first) pay an extra 1% Medicare surcharge — on top of the 1.5% Medicare (tax) most people pay — if they don't have hospital insurance. That means at least an extra \$500 or \$1000 each year.

Policies with an excess or co-payment of more than \$1000 per year don't exempt you from paying the Medicare surcharge, so we didn't include them in our 'cheapest policy' Best Buys. We also didn't include policies that don't cap their excess or co-payments.

In addition we left out policies that exclude services (rather than limit them for a time), as this means you'd have to go to a public hospital as a public patient, just as if you didn't have private health cover. However, policies like this might be even cheaper than our Best Buys. If you'd like to have a look at them, examples include:

- MBF Budget Hospital with exclusions: \$1000 excess per hospital visit, \$2000 total annual family excess.
- NRMA/SGIO/SGIC Hospital Select Value: \$1000 excess per hospital visit, \$2000 total annual family excess.

< Hospital insurance Best Buys

PRODUCT	PREMIUM PRICES IN THE STATES WHERE IT'S AVAILABLE								COST
	ACT	NSW	NT	Queensland	SA	Tasmania	Victoria	WA	Excess per visit
Fund and policy (in alphabetical order within groups)									
FULL COVER, \$0 EXCESS									
AHM Top Hospital	2144	2144	1434	2228	2206				
GMHBA Great Value Gold Hospital (H3)	2059	2059		2277	2142	2142	2142	1675	
HBA/Mutual Community Top Hospital	2084	2084	1435						
HCF Top Plus						2100			
Latrobe Top Hospital H3				2174	2174		2174		
Medibank Private Blue Ribbon Hospital	2137	2137	1399						
Peoplecare Private Plus	2071	2071		2071	2071	2071	2071		
FULL COVER, \$500 EXCESS									
GMHBA Great Value Gold Hospital Cover with excess E3	1602	1602		1678	1692	1692	1692	1259	250
Latrobe Top Hospital CoverWise X2 with \$250 excess (A)				1772	1772	1772	1772		250
MBF Advantage Hospital with \$250 excess (A)			1026						250
Medibank Private Blue Ribbon Excess Level 2 with \$500 excess	1695	1695	927						500
NRMA/SGIC/SGIO Hospital Value with \$250 excess (A)				1871		1717			250
Peoplecare Private Plus — Excess 250/500 (A)				1813	1813		1813		250
FULL OR LIMITED COVER, \$1000 EXCESS									
Australian Unity Comprehensive Hospital Cover with \$500 excess (A)					1517	1517			500
GMHBA Great Value Gold Hospital Cover with excess W3	1370	1370		1439	1453	1453	1453	886	500
HBA/Mutual Community Hospital Cover with excess Level 5	1452	1452							500
Latrobe Top Hospital CoverWise X3 with \$500 excess (A)	1394	1394		1394	1394	1394	1394		500
MBF Advantage Hospital with \$500 excess (A)			833						500
Peoplecare Private Plus — Excess 500/1000 (A)				1540	1540				500
CHEAPEST POLICY TO AVOID PAYING THE MEDICARE LEVY SURCHARGE									
HBA/Mutual Community Hospital Saver				1168		1022	1226		500
HCF Hospital Advanced Savings Option \$50*8	957	957	706	1117		957	1198	706	
Medibank Private First Choice Hospital Excess Level 3	873	873	625	1168	1067		1242		1000

USING THE TABLE

CHOICE's Best Buys give you a choice of various different levels of cover and excess/co-payment. All premiums shown are annual family premiums, paid by direct debit, with the 30% government rebate already deducted. (If you or your spouse are 65 or older you receive a 35% rebate; 40% for 70+.) Single premiums are usually half the family premium cost, while couples pay the same as a family. For single-parent costs, see *New services covered*, page 18.

We included funds open to the general public with more than 50,000 members plus a few smaller funds. All but MANCHESTER UNITY provided their information.

We only looked at hospital policies, but you can also get separate extras policies and combined hospitals/extras policies. If you're interested in these, a new website from the Private Health Insurance Ombudsman helps you compare private health insurance

policies for their cover, exclusions, waiting periods, premiums and excesses. Go to www.privatehealth.gov.au.

Cover

Hospital policies include most or all in-hospital treatments.

Listed here are conditions/treatments that some of the Best Buy policies limit.

- **L** Only provides cover as a private patient in a public hospital; you're not covered for a private hospital.
- **L12** For the first 12 months, the policy only provides cover as a private patient in a public hospital; you're not covered for a private hospital.

(A) You need to choose the '\$250 excess' policy option: it refers to \$250 per person, and therefore \$500 excess for a family. For \$1000 family excess you likewise choose the '\$500 excess' option.

[illegible]

Switching checklist

Health funds often claim it's easy to switch, but it can become stressful if things go wrong. Here's a list of steps to help:

- Get a detailed quote in writing from the new fund, showing government rebate, available discounts and Lifetime Cover loading.
- Apply for cover with the new fund.
- Ask the new fund to commence its cover only when the old cover is cancelled.
- The new fund may give you a request form to send to your old fund, or you'll have to write requesting cancellation of your old cover. Ask for a clearance certificate (which shows membership level and Lifetime Cover status) and an itemised claims statement from your old fund. Check back with your old fund if you haven't received an answer within one or two weeks.
- Keep a copy of the claims statement and the clearance certificate and send the originals to the new fund.
- If you pay via direct debit, cancel this with the old fund and advise your bank of the cancellation.
- Check your bank statement to make sure membership has commenced with the new fund and there's no overlap.

Tip Health funds sometimes offer special incentives, such as free cover for a period of time or no waiting period for cover. Ask the fund you'd like to join if it has any special offers or is prepared to match an offer from another fund. Also, some health funds reward long-term members with special bonuses, such as a higher claims limit for extras treatments. If you're entitled to these bonuses with your old fund, some funds may match them if you ask.



HEALTH FUND CONTACTS

- AHM, 13 42 46, www.ahm.com.au.
- AUSTRALIAN UNITY, 13 29 39, www.australianunity.com.au.
- GMHBA, 1300 446 422, www.gmhba.com.au.
- HBA, 13 12 43, www.hba.com.au.
- HBF, 13 34 23, www.hbf.com.au.
- HCF, 13 13 34, www.hcf.com.au.
- HEALTH PARTNERS, 1300 113 113, www.healthpartners.com.au.
- LATROBE HEALTH SERVICES, 1300 362 155, www.latrobehealth.com.au.
- MBF, 13 11 37, www.mbf.com.au.
- MEDIBANK PRIVATE, 13 23 31, www.medibank.com.au.
- MUTUAL COMMUNITY, 13 12 43, www.mutualcommunity.com.au.
- NIB, 13 14 63, www.nib.com.au.
- NRMA Health Insurance, 13 32 34, www.nrma.com.au.
- PEOPLECARE (now open to the public; formerly called Lysaght and only available to BHP/BlueScope Steel employees), 1800 808 700, www.peoplecare.com.au.
- SGIC HEALTH INSURANCE, 13 32 34, www.sgic.com.au.
- SGIO HEALTH INSURANCE, 13 32 34, www.sgio.com.au.

IN A NUTSHELL

- Our expert tasters came up with a CHOICE six-pack of top-rating beers in a variety of styles — lagers, pilsners, ales and stouts.
- The two mainstream brews we included for comparison (Victoria Bitter and Tooheys New) scored higher than plenty of more expensive premium beers (see the table, page 25, for details) — being foreign or expensive doesn't mean it's better.

Our expert tasters rate
46 premium beers.

Fancy a coldie?

Australians are certainly heading upmarket with their beer and drinking more imported stuff, not to mention local craft beers with names like 'Bluetongue' and 'Dogbolter'. While plenty of people are happy with the old standard brews, a good-sized minority of both men and women are experimenting with their tastebuds (at a cost to their wallets).

CHOICE got together a panel of experts (four men and two women) to taste 46 beers and recommend the ones you're most likely to feel are worth the extra money. We also threw a few more questions at them: do women like the same beer as men? Do exotic beers (known as 'premium' in the trade) taste better than your normal drop? Is there really a difference between lager, pilsner and ale? When you buy 'premium' beer, is the premium on the taste or just on the price?

If you're into trying more exotic beers, this article's for you — use our experts' advice to try beers you'll probably like and avoid expensive disappointments.

Hard to choose

There's no shortage of different brews to try — one big retailer supplied us with a stock list of more than 700 premium and imported beers. Sadly, we couldn't test them all. Also, many of the interesting craft beers are only sold locally, but they're well worth a try when you find one from your area.

We chose 46 top-selling premium beers that you should be able to find at your local bottle shop. Eighteen are imported and 28 brewed in Australia. All up, our experts tasted 24 lagers, nine pilsners, 11 ales and two stouts. (For what distinguishes these different types (or styles) of beer, see *Drinking in style*, far right.)

Fresh beer's best

Most of the top-scoring beers were Australian. Beer's best drunk fresh, so if you've enjoyed drinking a European or American beer in its homeland, you may be disappointed by its taste once it's journeyed here on a container ship.

On average, the imported beers in this test scored below the local brews; the imported BECK'S even scored lower than the Australian-produced version, which seems to bear out the freshness argument. But that's not to say you won't find some impressive imported beers if they've been stored and handled well and aren't too old — KOKANEE Glacier Beer from Canada was equal top for lagers, and PERONI Nastro Azzuro from Italy equal second.

Labels can be strong on brewmaster babble:

"Brewed in a traditional best bitter style with a fine balance of noble hop character and smooth malt undertones"; "Brewed with pale pilsener malt and a late gift of imported Hersbrucker hops", and so on. But most brands don't give you any indication of how fresh the beer is.

Beer goes stale within three to six months of bottling. Most brands have a best-before date stamped on the bottle (though it's sometimes very hard to find). The mainstream Australian brewers have agreed on a date nine months after bottling and most beers in this test still had more than six months to go when we bought them.

But a few brands had no date at all (only a coded batch number) and COOPERS has only an unhelpful 'best-after' date. The big US brewer Anheuser-Busch (BUDWEISER and MICHELOB) tells you on the label when the beer was brewed. Why can't Aussie brewers be as upfront?

What about the average punter?

It may (or may not) surprise you that the experts rated the two mainstream beers included in the test (VICTORIA BITTER and TOOHEYS New) higher than many of the more expensive imported beers. Full marks to the brewers of these standard drops for producing quality beers at an affordable price.

Many regular beer drinkers would probably agree, but the experts are trained to ignore personal preferences and judge the beers on quality alone. How do the rest of their scores relate to the preferences of ordinary beer drinkers?

To find out, we recruited 10 non-experts (five men and five women) who just enjoy a good beer. We gave them 18 of the beers to taste (10 lagers, four pilsners and four ales) — beers the experts thought were particularly good or bad, and a few in between.

Their verdict? Our lay beer buffs generally favoured the same beers as the experts, with one notable exception — most of the non-experts liked LITTLE CREATURES Pilsner, while the experts gave it the equal lowest score in the test.

So following the experts' recommendations is a good start, even if you might not always agree with them. If you want to experiment more widely, look out for premium beers on special to keep any disappointments cheap. A high price certainly didn't guarantee a better beer in this test: while the most expensive (KOKANEE, \$23 for a six-pack) rated very well, several other beers that cost us \$18–\$19 for six were well down the scores.

Girls' night out

Do women like different beers from men? It seems not. Our two female experts told us they considered and tasted the beers in the same way as the men, and >

CHOICE six-pack

These are the beers the experts gave the highest marks to. They're a mix of two lagers, a pilsner, two ales and a stout, and they all scored 16.5 or 17 out of 20.

- HAHN Premium Lager
- KOKANEE Glacier (lager)
- JAMES SQUIRE Golden Ale
- LITTLE CREATURES Bright Ale
- COOPERS Best Extra Stout
- BLUETONGUE Traditional Pilsener



Drinking in style

All beer starts off with four basic ingredients:

- Water.
- Malted grain (usually barley).
- Hops (for bitterness, flavour and aroma).
- Yeast (to ferment the malt).

From these four ingredients (once only three — hops were first included just a few hundred years ago) since the time of the pharaohs, brewers all over the world have created a vast number of different styles of beer. But there are still just two basic types — lagers and ales.

- **Lagers** are fermented with a yeast that works at cold temperatures, relatively slowly and at the bottom of the vat ('bottom-fermented'). This type of deep fermentation allows the flavours of the malt and hops to come out.
- **Pilsners** are lagers with more intense hop flavours.
- **Ales** have more intense, complex and fruity flavours that come largely from top-fermenting yeast that works quickly at near room temperature. They're matured for a shorter period than lagers.
- **Stouts** are darker ales made from malt that's been roasted at higher temperatures than for lagers and ales. This gives stouts a deep, rich colour and fuller flavour.

THE BIGGEST LOSER?

Is beer fattening? Of course it is if you sink too many — but it's less fattening than plenty of other drinks. On average, a 375 mL glass or bottle of lager gives you 580 kJ — a lot less than you'd get from a Mojito (about 950 kJ) or a VODKA CRUISER (about 850 kJ per 275 mL bottle).

Low-carb beers, such as PURE BLONDE and MICHELOB Ultra, can be marginally less fattening, but regular beer is only about 2% carbs anyway. Most of the flab-forming kilojoules come from the alcohol. If you're worried about a beer gut, you're better off going for low-alcohol beer — or cutting out alcohol altogether, of course.

< their scores didn't stand out as different. And our lay panel was 50% female and statistically their overall scores were no different from the men's.

Buying tips

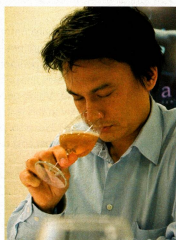
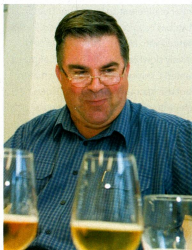
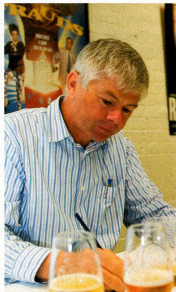
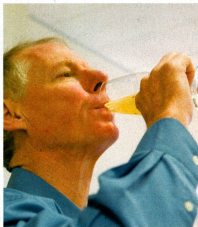
- Buy the freshest beer you can — get it from a bottle shop with a fast turnover, and look for best-before dates (for those bottles that carry them) with the longest time still to run, preferably at least six months.
- Don't get your brew from the glass-fronted fridges in bottle shops, especially if it's a beer that comes in clear glass bottles. Exposure to light causes a chemical reaction that gives the beer an off flavour that Americans call 'skunky'. (In this test, SOL and CORONA Extra came in clear glass bottles, and neither scored well.)
- Remember that beer is a perishable commodity. Treat it as you would milk — keep it somewhere cool and dark, and don't wait too long before you drink it; as if you needed any encouragement ... ■

HOW WE TESTED

- Our six experts (four men and two women; see *Meet the experts*, far right) tasted the beers in groups according to style (lager, pilsner, ale or stout). They didn't know which beer they were tasting, only its style.
- Each expert gave each beer a score out of 20, based on the system used in the Australian International Beer Awards: 3 for appearance, 6 for aroma, 8 for flavour and body and 3 for technical quality. A score of 17 or over would win a gold medal, 15.5 to 16.5 a silver and 14 to 15 a bronze. The score printed in the table is the experts' consensus score reached after the tasting, when they discussed the beers and their individual scores, still without knowing what the beers were. It's usually the average of their individual scores.

KEEP YOUR HEAD

Scientists have used complex maths to work out how the bubbles that make up the head on a glass of beer change over time. It turns out that it's the thickness of the liquid film round the bubbles that's the key factor — and this gives brewers a new level of head control. Expect more froth and bubble in the near future.



PRODUCT	SCORE	DETAILS			
Brand (in rank order within groups)	Score out of 20	Origin	Alcohol content (%)	Bottle / can size (mL)	Price per six-pack (\$)

LAGER

Hahn Premium Lager	16.5	Australia	5.0	330	14.00
Kokanee Glacier	16.5	Canada	5.0	355	23.00
Peroni Nastro Azzuro	16	Italy	5.1	330	15.00
Pure Blonde	16	Australia	4.6	355	13.00
Asahi Superdry	15.5	Thailand	5.0	330	19.00
Budweiser	15.5	USA	4.9	355	15.00
Coopers Premium Lager	15.5	Australia	5.0	375	13.00
Holsten Premium	15.5	Germany	5.0	330	13.00
James Boags Premium Lager	15.5	Australia	5.0	375	16.00
Tooheys New	15.5	Australia	4.6	375	11.00
Victoria Bitter	15.5	Australia	4.9	375	11.00
Carlsberg	15	Australia	5.0	330	16.00
Tooheys Extra Dry	15	Australia	5.0	345	12.00
Cascade Premium Lager	14.5	Australia	5.2	375	16.00
Großes Premium Lager	14.5	Holland	5.0	330	17.00
Haagen Premium Malt	14.5	Australia	5.0	330	11.00
Heineken Lager	14.5	Australia	5.0	330	15.00
Tiger	14.5	Singapore	5.0	330	18.00
Corona Extra	14	Mexico	4.6	330	14.95
Crown Lager	14	Australia	4.9	375	16.00
Red Stripe Lager	14	Jamaica	4.7	355	19.00
Singha Thai	14	Thailand	5.8	330	14.00
Michelob Ultra	13.5	USA	4.2	355	12.00
Sol	12	Mexico	4.5	330	15.00

PILSNER

Bluetongue Traditional Pilsener	16.5	Australia	4.5	330	17.00
Beck's (local)	15.5	Australia	5.0	330	19.60
James Squire Pilsener	15.5	Australia	5.0	345	16.00
San Miguel Pale Pilsen	15.5	Philippines	5.0	355	13.90
Beck's (imported)	15	Germany	5.0	330	15.00
Stella Artois	15	Australia	5.2	330	14.95
Matilda Bay Bohemian Pilsner	13	Australia	4.7	345	14.85
Bitburger Premium	11.5	Germany	4.8	330	14.00
Little Creatures Pilsner	11.5	Australia	4.6	330	19.00

USING THE TABLE

• **Price per six-pack** This is based on prices we paid in discount bottle shops in Sydney in April 2007, but specials come up regularly in bottle shops, so that's the best time to try a new beer.

(A) Price for a pack of four cans.

PRODUCT	SCORE	DETAILS			
Brand (in rank order within groups)	Score out of 20	Origin	Alcohol content (%)	Bottle / can size (mL)	Price per six-pack (\$)

ALE

James Squire Golden Ale	17	Australia	4.5	345	13.85
Little Creatures Bright	17	Australia	4.5	330	19.00
Crackback Pale Ale	16.5	Australia	4.9	330	19.00
Little Creatures Pale Ale	16.5	Australia	5.2	330	19.00
James Squire Amber Ale	16	Australia	5.0	345	13.85
Barons Extra Special Bitter	15	Australia	4.7	330	16.00
Cascade Pale Ale	14.5	Australia	5.0	375	11.85
Coopers Sparkling Ale	14.5	Australia	5.8	375	14.00
Coopers Original Pale Ale	13	Australia	4.5	375	13.00
Boddington's Pub Ale	12.5	England	4.7	440	14.00 (A)
Kilkenny Irish	12.5	Ireland	4.3	330	15.00

STOUT

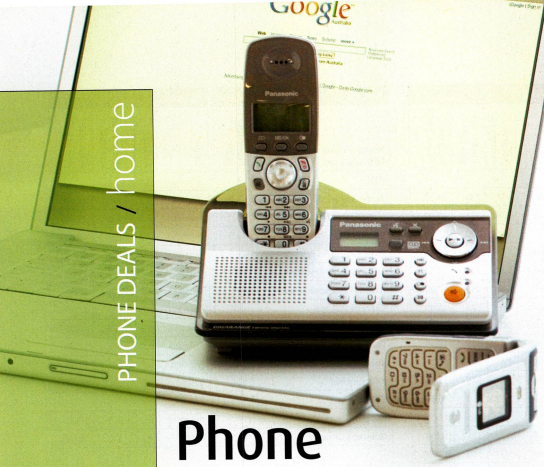
Coopers Best Extra Stout	17	Australia	6.3	375	15.00
Guinness Draught	15.5	Ireland	4.2	440	16.00



Meet the experts

Cheers to our expert tasters, who did an outstanding job (pictured from left to right):

- Geoff Skurray, Professor of Oenology, University of Western Sydney.
- Nicola Rimmer, Brewer, Tooheys.
- Paul Rogers, wine lawyer and lecturer, University of Western Sydney
- Caroline Aspidis, Draught Operations Manager, Fosters Australia.
- Franklin Lucarotti, Malt Shovel Brewery.
- Peter Aldred, Course Co-ordinator for the Graduate Diploma of Brewing, School of Science and Engineering, University of Ballarat.



Phone and internet packages

'Bundling' is aggressively marketed, but what are the real savings — and the hidden traps?

Have you received calls telling you how you can switch your phone provider or combine ('bundle') your phone and internet services with one company to save heaps of money? Even if you've thought of doing this, you're probably feeling confused by the sheer number and complexity of offers around — how do you compare the phone and internet charges offered?

The truth is that comparing these bundled packages is next to impossible, even for the pros. Comparison website PhoneChoice says telcos' pricing structures for bundles are too complex even for quantitative analysis and modelling — there have been several failed attempts to develop systems to compare the offers.

Meanwhile, the companies' ads do little to help bewildered consumers; in fact they often make things more confusing. Recently, it took a Federal Court judge

to adjudicate over which of two mobile phone plans was cheaper (see *\$49 plan judged better value than \$40 plan*, on page 28).

Having your say

We asked CHOICE Online readers to tell us their experiences — good and bad — of bundling and switching to a new provider. The responses, along with the emails and letters CHOICE members regularly send us, highlight some potential pitfalls.

- **Locked in** By bundling services with the same company, you might lose the flexibility to choose the best individual offers as they come along. Or you might sign up for a whizbang deal, only to find there's a drawback you didn't know about and you have to pay a high exit fee to get out of its 12–24-month contract. If you're already in any fixed-term contract,

check for exit penalties before you switch.

- **Dodgy sales calls** Several readers were switched to a new provider without realising it, after unwittingly 'agreeing' to this verbally over the phone. They felt tricked and misled. Others received repeated pressurising sale calls. At times, it wasn't clear which company was calling them, or the services being offered weren't properly explained (see *Verbal agreement wasn't clear* on page 28 for an example).

- **False economies** Readers told us how supposedly cheap internet deals came with strings attached, such as having to sign up for more expensive local calls, line rental and international calls. One reader told us how the 'special' deal he was offered on local calls as part of a package was more expensive than what's available to anyone without bundling. And sometimes new or hidden fees can apply — for example, you might switch to stop paying line rental but end up paying an equivalent 'service charge' anyway. Other hidden costs include charges for exceeding your internet download limit. Some internet service providers (ISPs) slow down your connection after you exceed your limit instead.

- **Teething problems** After switching, some readers experienced initial problems and delays, such as long waits for the new service to be connected or delivered, or continuing to receive a bill from the old provider. And while waiting to be connected, some people were billed for new services they hadn't yet received.

IN A NUTSHELL

- Comparing bundled phone and internet services and prices is practically impossible.
- There are discounts for bundling, but avoid the pitfalls — for example, you may end up paying for services you don't use, get locked into a contract or be pressured into a verbal agreement over the phone.

Scenario 1: Light-use couple

We compared the cost of a bundled package of fixed-line, mobile and internet services from the four largest residential phone companies, for a couple with low to medium use. We assumed they have a landline and a basic broadband package and they each have a mobile phone. Their call patterns and internet use are based on data from PhoneChoice, and are listed in detail in *Using the table*, right. If your usage pattern is similar to this scenario, the same costs could apply. However, it's included mainly as an example — differences in usage patterns can make a big difference to costs.

Overall, the couple could pay \$134 (PRIMUS), \$138 (AAPT), \$150 (TELSTRA) or \$171 (OPTUS) per month for the bundled services (see Table 1, below). If they bought all three services (home phone, mobile and internet) from any single company without availing themselves of the bundling discount, the cost would be higher.

The main discounts are on monthly internet fees; each company offers discounts for combining your home phone and internet. There was little difference between these four companies' fixed-line rental and call charges for this call pattern (all around \$50 per month).

Broadband plans we compared cost from \$22 to \$29 on average per month after discounts (contracts are usually for two years). The cheapest, TELSTRA Entry Big Broadband, has a lower download maximum than the other three, but more expensive plans with higher downloads are available.

The difference between the overall costs in Table 1 is mainly due to the mobile phone plans chosen. After discounts, two phones on AAPT's \$29 per month plan would just cover the couple's use; PRIMUS's \$25 plan would take them just a few dollars over \$50; while the most suitable plans we found from OPTUS and TELSTRA have a minimum spend of \$49 and \$40 per phone per month, respectively. Those deals include a 'free' handset, unlike the cheaper plans from AAPT and PRIMUS, and the included call value is also higher.

Table 1. Light-use couple

Company (in alphabetical order)	Fixed line plan	Fixed line cost (\$)	Mobile phone plan	Cost for two mobiles (\$)	Internet plan	Internet costs (\$)	Package price (\$)	What you get for bundling
AAPT	Anytime Plus	51	\$29 Cap	58	256k Standard	29	138	Internet discount of \$10–\$20 per month.
Optus	Home Basic	46	\$49 Cap	98	Light	27 (B)	171	2 months' free broadband if you bundle your home phone and/or eligible mobile for 24 months.
Primus	Value	52	Selecta 25	57	Light	25	134	Internet discount of \$10 per month, plus mobile discount of \$10 per month, for bundling with your fixed line.
Telstra	HomeLine Plus	48 (A)	\$40 Phone Plan	80	Entry Big Broadband	22 (B)	150	If you have more than one Telstra service, you're eligible for Rewards Options. This could give you 50 free local calls, for example. Entry Big Broadband offer is only available if you have an eligible Telstra mobile or home phone. Further family call discounts are available.

USING THE TABLE

Prices are rounded to the nearest dollar, and take discounts, fixed costs and call costs into account.

Use is based on information from PhoneChoice. Installation and hardware (such as a modem) may be extra. The couple has the following monthly use:

- **Fixed line** 23 local calls, six four-minute STD calls, 10 two-minute calls to mobiles.
- **Mobile** Two mobile phones, between them making:
 - Six local calls, each lasting three minutes and 30 seconds, evenly split between peak and off-peak.
 - Eight same-network mobile-to-mobile calls, each lasting four minutes and 30 seconds (evenly split between peak and off-peak).
 - Eight different-network mobile-to-mobile calls, each lasting four minutes and 30 seconds (evenly split between peak and off-peak).
 - 30 domestic SMS.
 - 30 voicemail calls (evenly split between deposit and retrieval).
- **Broadband** Minimum speed 256 kbps, download limit less than 5 GB of data.

(A) Assumes calls to mobiles are equally divided between Telstra and non-Telstra mobiles.

(B) Average monthly fee over 24 months, including discounts.

The truth about bundling

All the major telcos offer deals, rewards and discounts if you bundle your phone and internet services with them. Some also include pay TV. To get a telco's best internet deal, you often need to bundle it with other services. While TELSTRA, OPTUS, AAPT and PRIMUS are probably the major players for most people, plenty of smaller ISPs offer packaged broadband and voice call deals too.

As an example, if you have a TELSTRA home phone and you add one of its mobile, broadband or pay TV

services, you'll receive the choice of an additional 50 local calls, 50 SMS or \$15 of calls to a nominated family member's TELSTRA mobile each month. The bonus increases if you add a mobile phone or pay TV service to the bundle.

PRIMUS offers \$10 off its monthly monthly fees, and \$10 off its broadband monthly fees, when you bundle these services with a home phone plan. When new customers combine OPTUS broadband with an OPTUS home phone or mobile plan, they get two months of their 24-month internet contract free. >

< Bundling can make sense — for example, if you already have phone and internet with the same company and you don't plan to change for at least the length of its contract period, why wouldn't you accept a discount for its bundled services? Similarly, if you're shopping around for an ISP or to upgrade your connection from dial-up to broadband, it's worth comparing your phone company's price and the discount it gives to its fixed-line customers. And sometimes, switching to a completely new provider for a bundled package can make sense, especially if it's fairly easy to work out the advantages.

Even if you're pretty happy with your service provider, you may not be on the best deal. But don't wait for the company to contact you — they don't automatically give their best rates to existing

customers. You need to contact it periodically to renegotiate and ensure you're being charged the best current rates and offers.

Checklist: Before you bundle

- Avoid paying for services you don't need.
- Check recent bills to determine your typical monthly phone and internet use. Ask companies what their suitable bundled packages will cost and compare this with what you're currently paying, to find out if bundling for a discount is really worth it. Try to compare individual (non-bundled) offers too.
- Mobile phone plans are the hardest to compare, particularly when you throw discounts for bundling, such as free SMS and cheaper same-network calls, into the mix. CHOICE Online members can use the



"I ended up on a reduced package which I would not have accepted if it had been explained to me."

Verbal agreement wasn't clear

When Steve's internet, cable TV and telephone provider OPTUS offered a new package to encourage existing subscribers to upgrade to digital TV, he did the sums and worked out it'd be slightly cheaper overall. On the downside, he'd have to pay for all local calls (the previous package included 50 free local calls) and sign a two-year contract.

However, after the new digital service was installed, Steve discovered that his internet download limits had been reduced. "At no time in my discussions with OPTUS over the new package did they say my maximum monthly web downloads would be reduced, just that the fee would be cut as part of the deal," Steve says. "I ended up on a reduced package which I would not have accepted if it had been explained to me."

Steve says the full details of the package weren't disclosed by OPTUS. "I was given no written offer or contract — only verbal agreement over the phone. I feel I was misled and it wasn't made clear to me what the offer included."

Fortunately (and to the company's credit), OPTUS responded well to Steve's complaint about what had happened. It offered one month of free digital TV and reinstated Steve's original cable internet service and download limits for a lower price than before.

DO YOU NEED A LANDLINE? While the take-up of mobile phone, broadband internet and other technologies and services is increasing, the number of fixed lines is going in the opposite direction. This isn't surprising really — readers have told us how their capped mobile phone plans can provide better value than a landline, while fast internet allows us to use new technologies like Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) for cheap calls. We'll look at substitutes for a fixed line in the next issue of CHOICE.

\$49 plan judged better value than \$40 plan

With mobile phone pricing plans, it's hard to know what claims to believe. TELSTRA recently tried to stop an OPTUS ad that suggested the OPTUS \$49 per month capped plan was better value than TELSTRA's \$40 per month contract. The case went to the Federal Court, which ruled that comparing the two plans in the ad was OK. It found it was undeniable that someone making the maximum number of two-minute calls would get better value under the Optus \$49 cap than they would under the Telstra \$40 plan.

Of course, it's important to look at the fine print. The OPTUS ad that you've probably seen on billboards, TV and in the press stipulates that the comparisons between the two companies only relate to two-minute voice calls to home and mobile numbers in Australia. "Other call lengths will have a different result," the small print says, as well as

pointing out that the \$49 minimum monthly spend is part of a two-year contract.

The ad says the OPTUS plan would cover 153 two-minute calls per month, eight times as many as TELSTRA's plan, which covers just 19 two-minute calls. We calculate that this is true once you spend at least 50 minutes on the phone each month. But there's a twist — if you spend less than about 50 minutes on voice calls each month, TELSTRA could work out cheaper, as Table 1, page 27, shows.

Confused? You're probably meant to be — it's a classic example of mobile phone plans being too complicated for most people to work out what would be the best value, and so reducing your ability to make valid choices.

PhoneChoice interactive mobile phone plan database at choice.com.au to compare plans, and the website phonechoice.com.au has a range of telco and internet price comparison tools and reader forums that can help. There are also forums at whirlpool.net.au.

- Be wary of unsolicited sales calls — you might verbally agree to switch provider without realising it. If you're interested in a deal, ask for details in writing and take your time deciding. If you're feeling hassled,

just hang up. Never agree to anything on the spot.

- Watch for long fixed-term contracts and exit fees, both with your existing provider and the one you'd like to switch to. If you switch, you could be locked in for 12–24 months.
- A cooling-off period after you switch isn't always mandatory (it depends where you live and whether you were cold-called), but if you get one, use it to diligently compare the costs and conditions of the new plan, once you have the details in writing. ■

Scenario 2: Heavy-use family

This family has very high communications costs, bundling two mobiles, a fixed line and high-speed internet (their usage patterns were based on data from PhoneChoice and are listed in detail in *Using the table*, right). The main discounts are for bundling the internet with fixed-line rental and service — the savings are up to \$20 per month below standalone prices. Overall, we calculate that the four providers compared would charge from around \$335 (AAPT, OPTUS and PRIMUS) to \$393 (TELSTRA) per month for these bundled services. TELSTRA gives \$25 of free family calls from the home phone to a bundled TELSTRA mobile, though, so if used, that'd bring TELSTRA's overall charges closer to the other companies', at \$368.

TELSTRA's fixed-line charges are higher than the others' comparable plans; the \$89.90 monthly fee for HomeLine Ultimate is about average, but it doesn't include calls to mobiles and international numbers, unlike some of the other plans.

The most suitable mobile phone plans would cost \$138–\$158 per month for two phones, each on broadly comparable \$69 and \$79 monthly plans). Unlike some of the others, TELSTRA's 3G plan doesn't include a handset — you have to provide that yourself or buy it separately.

The call value included with these plans would generally cover the family's high mobile phone use, but it's important to compare plans based on your individual needs (see *Checklist: Before you bundle*, above left, for where to get more information).

USING THE TABLE

Prices are rounded to the nearest dollar, and take discounts, fixed costs and call costs into account.

Use is based on information from PhoneChoice. Installation and hardware (such as a modem) may be extra. The family has the following monthly use:

- **Fixed line** 116 local calls, 29 three-minute STD calls, 81 two-minute calls to mobiles, three 18-minute calls to the UK.
- **Mobile** Two mobile phones, between them making:
 - 30 minutes of local calls, evenly split between peak and off-peak.
 - 751 minutes of mobile-to-mobile calls, evenly split between peak and off-peak.
 - 300 domestic SMS.
 - 120 minutes of voicemail calls (evenly split between deposit and retrieval).
- **Broadband** ADSL2+ or cable internet if available. Otherwise we chose the fastest comparable broadband plan available from each company. Minimum 20 Gb monthly.

(A) Assumes national calls are equally divided between peak and off-peak.

(B) Assumes calls to mobiles are equally divided between Telstra and non-Telstra mobiles.

(C) Average monthly fee over 24 months, including discounts.

(D) Could be reduced to \$368 if \$25 of free family calls are used.

Table 2. Heavy-use family

Company (in alphabetical order)	Fixed line plan	Fixed line cost (\$)	Mobile phone plan	Cost for two mobiles (\$)	Internet plan	Internet cost (\$)	Package price (\$)	What you get for bundling
AAPT	\$89 Homechat	119	\$69 Mobile Cap	138	8000k Extreme Broadband	79	336	Internet discount of \$10–\$20 per month.
Optus	HomeOne	106 (A)	\$79 Cap	158	Power	70	334	2 free months of broadband if you bundle with an Optus home phone and/or eligible mobile for 24 months. Mobile: free 20-minute voice calls (8 pm–midnight) to other Optus mobiles in Australia are available (no flagfall applies). On Optus Cap plans, you can put all your mobiles on one account and receive free 5-minute voice calls from your cap plan to mobiles on the same account.
Primus	HomeCap 75	105	MobileCap 79	158	Intense20	70	333	Mobile discount of \$10 per month, plus internet discount of \$10 per month, when bundled with a home phone plan.
Telstra	HomeLine Ultimate	160 (B)	\$79 3G and Next G Cap Plan	158	BigPond Cable	75 (C)	393 (D)	If you have more than one Telstra service, you're eligible for Rewards Options. Bundling two eligible services with the home phone, for example, can give an additional \$25 of 'free' calls from the home phone to the Telstra mobile.

The new mixed veg

A shortcut to a healthier diet.

IN A NUTSHELL

- The new packs of interesting and varied mixed vegetables in your supermarket freezer make it easy to cook up a tasty and healthy variety of veggies within a few minutes.
- Some brands include a sauce as well, but they're all very salty, and they add to the cost. It's pretty easy to make your own.

Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables — we've all heard this often enough. It's easy to say, but if you're busy, it's the end of the week, the veggies from last weekend's shop look pretty limp by now and the kids are bored with carrot and broccoli, is there an easy way to keep following the mantra? CHOICE looked at the modern version of frozen mixed veg, and we think there is.

Manufacturers have moved beyond the traditional carrots, peas and corn, and you'll find veggie packs in the freezer containing five or six different kinds — and it's interesting food, such as bamboo shoots, bok choy, yellow beans, baby sweetcorn, red capsicum, sugar snap peas, water chestnuts ...

What's more, eating a variety of veggies is important to meet that health goal, because different veggies contain different nutrients. There's now solid scientific evidence that people who eat plenty of fruit and veggies are less likely to have heart disease, a stroke or some cancers. It's just about the only piece of dietary advice that all health experts agree on.

As a bonus, frozen vegetables don't lose much nutritional value when they're processed — they can in fact be more nutritious than 'fresh' vegetables that have been stored for too long. (For more on this see *Vegetables: are fresh best?*, CHOICE, April 2007.)

What's in the bag?

Do these products really contain what's promised on the label? We got up close and intimate with 24 varieties of frozen mixed vegetables designed to make a specific dish — usually a stir-fry (see *Veggies for all*, right, for details). We wanted to see just how good a variety you got, so we picked out, identified and weighed the different amounts of bamboo shoots, capsicum, snow peas and bok choy as well as the usual carrots, broccoli and peas.

All the packs contained all the vegetables identified on the label. And while the photos might not show the abundance of broccoli stalks we found in some products (stalks made up about 70% of the broccoli in one bag of BIRDS EYE Malaysian Stir Fry), on the whole they give a fair impression of the proportions.

The vegetables you're most likely to find are carrots and broccoli, but at least they're two of the veggies kids like best, according to research — potato and corn are others. CHANG'S Stir Fry Vegetables with Snow Peas has the greatest number of different vegetables, with seven; HEINZ Fresh Ideas Family Casserole Mix has the least with three.

Saucy

The general idea is you add these veggies (straight from the freezer) to stir-fried meat or fish, and there are usually recipes on the back suggesting you also add your own flavours (such as soy sauce, garlic, lemon, ginger, sesame oil and so on).

To make life even easier, some of these products include a sauce (in a separate plastic pouch). While convenient if you're in a hurry, these sauces are primarily water, sugar, salt, colours and thickeners. They make the food unnecessarily salty, and so detract from the health boost you're otherwise giving yourself.

It's cheaper (all the products with sauce cost more) and you'll end up with a healthier, tastier meal if you buy a variety without sauce and instead add your own flavours — it really doesn't take long to add a bit of garlic, ginger or lemon juice to the wok, for example. Just go easy on the soy sauce — it's pretty high in salt. Try a reduced-salt variety. ■

Veggies for all

These are the 'new' mixed frozen veggies we found in supermarkets and checked out. They're all a good way to get your veggies, so we're not singling any out as a Best Buy — just pick the ones with the veggies you like that suit what you plan to cook.

For comparison, the prices are per 500 g of vegetables (not counting any sauce that's included), based on the prices we paid for packs of various sizes in Sydney supermarkets in April 2007. We've listed them in order of the number of different types of vegetable they contain (shown in brackets after the name).

CHANG'S Stir Fry Vegetables with Snow Peas (7)	\$3.95
BIRDS EYE Create a Meal Chow Mein* (6)	\$5.30
BIRDS EYE Create a Meal Honey Soy* (6)	\$4.75
BIRDS EYE Create a Meal Satay* (6)	\$5.30
BIRDS EYE Stir Fry Chow Mein (6)	\$3.20
HEINZ Fresh Ideas Chinese Mix (6)	\$2.75
HEINZ Fresh Ideas Italian Casserole Mix (6)	\$2.50
HEINZ Fresh Ideas Mediterranean Mix (6)	\$2.85
HEINZ Fresh Ideas Thai Mix (6)	\$2.75
LOGAN FARM Aussie Style Stir Fry (6)	\$2.65
MCCAIN Stir Fry Vegetables Chinese (6)	\$3.30
MCCAIN Stir Fry Vegetables Thai Style (6)	\$3.30
BIRDS EYE Create a Meal Black Bean* (5)	\$5.20
BIRDS EYE Create a Meal Honey & Garlic* (5)	\$5.25
BIRDS EYE Create a Meal Sweet & Sour* (5) (A)	\$5.95
BIRDS EYE Stir Fry Cantonese (5)	\$3.20
BIRDS EYE Stir Fry Malaysian (5)	\$3.50
BIRDS EYE Stir Fry Shanghai (5)	\$3.20
BIRDS EYE Stir Fry Thai Style (5)	\$3.10
CHANG'S Stir Fry Vegetables with Bok Choy (5)	\$3.95
HEINZ Fresh Ideas Mexican Mix (5)	\$2.75
MCCAIN Stir Fry Vegetables Pasta Alfredo* (5)	\$5.25
BIRDS EYE Create a Meal Teriyaki* (4)	\$5.45
HEINZ Fresh Ideas Family Casserole Mix (3)	\$2.50

* Comes with sauce in a separate plastic pouch.

(A) For the sake of argument, we've included pineapple in the veggie count.



GENE ROSS

Sofa beds 101

In April's *Hard Word* we featured an ad for a sofa bed that claimed it was "great for unwanted holiday guests". OK, so they probably meant 'unexpected' rather than 'unwanted', but it tickled many a funny bone among our contributors, suggesting to them that the bed might not be very comfortable. And no doubt there are many among you who've had the unfortunate experience of a less than comfortable sleep on a dodgy sofa bed. It's enough to make you feel ... well, unwanted.

CHOICE has compiled this price-point shopping guide to get you up to speed on what's out there, how much it will cost and what to look for when shopping.

The models we chose are good examples of the features and

quality you'll typically get for your money in each price range.

In the real world, though, prices are a little more malleable, and with a little give and take, you can more or less customise your own sofa bed: the bed mechanism, mattress, choice of fabric and cushion fillings can often be altered to suit your needs.

First things first

The kind of sofa bed you buy — and how much you spend — will depend largely on how you'll use it.

- If it's going in your lounge room and will be used mainly as a sofa, its comfort, style and practicality (durability, cleanability and so on) will be your prime concern. You might want to spend more on a good sofa and less on the bed mechanism — one with a foam

IN A NUTSHELL

- We chose three two-and-a-half seater sofa beds at three different price points: \$749, \$1299 and \$2150.
- The beds are double in size, and feature a 'trampoline' sleeping surface: a woven polypropylene mat attached to the frame with springs.
- We show you, feature by feature, what to look for and what you can expect to find at these price points.

Three sofa bed price points



Coogee

Retailer: Fantastic Furniture (www.fantasticfurniture.com.au)

Sofa dimensions (cm): 205 W x 81 D x 77 H; 220 cm from back of sofa to end of bed.

Warranty: Five years on sofa frame; one year on bed mechanism; two years on seat cushions; one year on fabric.

Options: Stain-resistance treatment (\$70, five-year warranty). We chose from the 'everyday' fabric range ('fabric A'); fabric B costs \$80 extra.



Ashbury

Retailer: Freedom Furniture (www.freedom.com.au)

Sofa dimensions (cm): 203 W x 92 D x 72 H (90 cm to the top of the loose back cushions); 240 cm from back of sofa to end of bed.

Warranty: 10 years on sofa frame and seat cushions; two years on mechanism; five years on back cushions.

Options: Foam mattress instead of inner-spring \$1199. Stain-resistance treatment \$90.



Stravinski

Retailer: Sofa Bed Specialists (www.sofabedspecialists.com.au)

Price paid: \$2150 for a 2.5 seater and inner-spring double bed; other sizes are available.

Sofa dimensions (cm): 205 W x 105 D x 80 H; 225 cm from back of sofa to end of bed.

Warranty: 10 years on frame, one year on bed mechanism, 'lifetime' on seat cushions, five years on back cushions. Warranty on fabric depends on the fabric you choose, generally 1–5 years.

Options: \$2150 is the price for a two-and-a-half seater sofa that converts to a double bed. What's pictured is a three-seater that converts to a queen bed, which costs \$2495 with a mid-price fabric.



mattress may do the trick for the occasional guest (though inner springs aren't a great deal more expensive).

- If, on the other hand, it's going in the spare room, to be used more as a guest bed than a sofa, put more value on the bed mechanism and mattress, and get a simpler sofa, perhaps without separate back cushions.

Other things to consider include:

- If you regularly host couples, consider going queen size in a three-seater sofa. This may not be an option at furniture chain stores with standardised production.

- For kids, you could get away with a foam mattress instead of inner spring.
- If you're pushed for space, look for an armless sofa (use bolsters on the seat ends), or get an ottoman with a fold-out bed.
- When you're checking what will fit, don't forget to measure the distance from the back of the sofa to the end of the opened bed.

Put it to the test

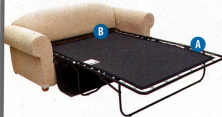
When you're shopping, take someone with you — someone much heavier than you if you're light or much lighter if you're heavy.

Try out the bed: lie on your back and both sides, and move around while the other person lies still. Is it comfortable? Is there more movement than you'd like? Do you roll into the middle?

Also test the sofa. Do you tip sideways when sitting? Is it too firm to sit comfortably on? How close to the arms can you get before it becomes awkward or uncomfortable? Some sofas we tried were very hard and uncomfortable with the sofa bed inside, yet the non-bed version of the same model was much more comfortable. The take-home message from this is *never* choose a sofa bed without testing the complete package.

Decision guide: What do you get for your money?

BED FRAME

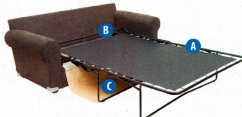


Coogee

(A) **Tubes** Round.

(B) **Mattress retainer** The bar at the head of the bed is raised to keep the mattress from sliding off. There are no retainers at the foot end.

This bed doesn't have a TV headrest (see right) or additional supports directly under the 'trampoline' mat. Because the mattress is quite thin, make sure you can't feel any bars supporting the sleeping platform (a common complaint with some sofa beds).



Ashbury

(A) **Tubes** Round.

(B) **Mattress retainer** The bar at the head of the bed is raised to keep the mattress from sliding off. There are no retainers at the foot end.

(C) **Support wires/bars** Slats on the underside of the bed at hip level provide body support. They also provide increased support under the sofa cushions, so it doesn't sag in the middle.

There's no TV headrest (see right).



Stravinski

(A) **Tubes** Square. These allow greater precision during assembly for better overall quality.

(B) **Mattress retainers** The bar at the head of the bed is raised to keep the mattress from sliding off. Retainers at the foot of the bed hold the mattress firmly in place.

(C) **Support wires/bars** There's a support bar at hip level for structural strength.

(D) **TV headrest** The head-end of the bed can be raised for reading or watching TV.

(E) **Seat support** Support wires at the foot of the bed provide increased support when used as a sofa, so it doesn't sag in the middle.

(F) **Comfort curves** Contoured seat section on the frame: at the bottom end of the bed there are convex curves in the side frame — when it's all inside as a sofa, they're concave, allowing you to sit closer to the edge of the cushion (next to the arm).

(G) **Extended deck coverage** The polypropylene decking (trampoline) extends beyond the frame, so when folded up it goes right to the sides of the sofa base, covering the springs and minimising contact between the upholstery and the springs.

CHOICE sofa bed verdict

- Get your priorities right: if you're mainly going to sit on it, make sure it's comfortable and well built as a sofa. If it's mainly going to be used as a bed, concentrate on the bed mechanism and the quality of the mattress.
- You seem to get better cushions if you pay more, and probably a better mattress. Other than that the differences between a £750 and a £1300 sofa bed seem fairly small. Both of our sofas at these prices arrived with cracks in their frame. Only in the £2000+ price range did we start to see attention to detail and to quality. So if you're going to live with the sofa on a daily basis, rather than hiding it in a spare room, it's worth buying at the high end of the market.

The bed frame, sofa frame, mattress, mechanism, cushions, fabric and quality of finish are the crucial components to base your buying decisions around.

SOFA FRAME



Coogee

The frame is made from pine, and non-structural components from chipboard. There was a crack in one of the beams.



Ashbury

The frame is made from pine, and non-structural components from chipboard. One of the boards had cracked into several pieces, with the rear left leg caved in.



Stravinski

Solid pine throughout.

DECISION GUIDE

- Push down on the back rail and arms and try to wiggle them. A little give is OK, but it shouldn't be excessive. For greatest strength, frames should be assembled using dowels, with corner blocks to reinforce joints.
- Hardwood is more expensive than pine, and 'kiln-dried' hardwood means moisture has been removed, minimising future warping. As a rough guide, this will add at least \$500 to the price of a sofa bed. A hardwood frame should last a lifetime, as long as it's well constructed. Two of our sofa beds already had cracks in the pine structure, which doesn't bode well for their longevity, although they both come with a warranty.
- Check the padding by kneading the frame along the back rails and arms: hard or sharp edges indicate skimpy padding.

MATTRESS



Coogee

Foam, 6 cm thick
Cotton cover
134 cm wide,
180 cm long



Ashbury

Inner spring, 15 cm
Damask cover
133 cm wide,
190 cm long



Stravinski

Inner spring, 15 cm
Damask cover
133 cm wide,
181 cm long

DECISION GUIDE

- Inner-spring mattresses are more comfortable than foam, and not a lot more expensive. Rotate the mattress periodically to prolong its life.
- Can you feel the bars? A common complaint with sofa beds is that you can feel the support bars though the mattress.
- You can add a 'topper' to make a mattress thicker — but you'll have to store it somewhere.

HOW MANY FOLDS?



Coogee

Tri-fold (folds into three).



Ashbury

Tri-fold (folds into three).



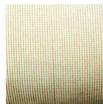
Stravinski

Bi-fold (folds into two).

DECISION GUIDE

A bi-fold bed is better because it allows you to use a thicker mattress, and the fewer folds in the mattress, the better. It's also a little easier to set up. However, the sofa has to be of a design that can accommodate its depth.

FABRIC



Coogee

100% polyester. Graded 'domestic medium-duty/commercial light-duty' according to the Australian Standard for upholstery fabrics (AS 2687-1997). Stain protection is available for an extra \$70.



Ashbury

100% polyester. Graded 'domestic medium-duty/commercial light-duty'. Stain protection available for an extra \$90.



Stravinski

Chenille (polycotton). Graded 'domestic medium-duty/commercial light-duty'.

DECISION GUIDE

Your choice of fabric can substantially alter the price of the sofa bed. Unfortunately, though, cost of fabric isn't a reliable guide to its quality. For example, big retailers can keep prices down on popular fabrics due to mass-production and buying power, whereas more expensive fabrics may have racked up their costs due to lower production rates and consequent loss of economies of scale. Also, some commercial-grade fabrics (for use in cinemas or offices, say) can be tough but cheap; more expensive ones may be more delicate.

As a guide to quality, when you're in the shop, ask for fabric samples or swatches, so you can give the fabric a better appraisal than you could by just looking at the finished product.

- Fabric should be firmly woven: hold it up to the light and see how tight the weave is.
- Look at the raw edges of the fabric to check for any evidence of fraying or unravelling. This could mean that the fabric stretches and pulls away at the seams of your sofa.
- Stretch the fabric diagonally and release: does it completely recover? If not, the fabric may wrinkle and buckle over time.
- A latex backing may be applied to the back of the fabric to help prevent seam slippage, make precise cutting easier and prevent dirt seeping through. This is especially important in looser-weave fabrics.

SETTING IT UP



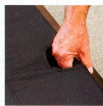
Googee

You need to pull it up and out, then unfold it; a bit fiddly, quite stiff and heavy.



Ashbury

You need to pull it up and out, then unfold it; a bit fiddly, quite stiff and heavy. It has a handle to make the initial lift-out easier, though.



Stravinski

Easy to pull out, pretty well just pulling in one direction. Feels very light and smooth, though the frame is in fact heavier than the other sofas.

DECISION GUIDE

Test the mechanism in the shop, both pulling it out and putting it back in. If it's too hard, keep looking, though bear in mind it should get easier once you get the knack and the joints loosen up.

FINISHING



Googee

Generally quite well-finished and the obvious linear texture mostly lies straight — there are some off-kilter lines near seams, minor instances of crooked seams and some puckering at the curves of the arms.



Ashbury

Generally well-finished, with only some slight puckering on the arms.



Stravinski

Excellent quality of finish and generally more detail than the other two sofas.

DECISION GUIDE

- Check the seams and piping, to make sure they're straight and unpuckered. Also check the fabric lies straight, especially if there are obvious stripes or a linear pattern (either printed on the fabric or within its texture).

Note, however, that unless you're buying floor stock, the sofa bed that ends up in your home may be better or worse than what you saw in the shop. A look at the general quality of upholstery provided by the manufacturer might give you an idea of what you'll get, so look at a variety of similarly priced products in the store. Check what your rights are regarding returns/replacements if you're not happy with what you get.

- If the sofa isn't going to be standing against a wall, remember to check the rear as well.

BACK CUSHIONS



Googee

Fixed back — no cushions. The back is hollow, with padding and elasticised webbing in the backrest to give it a springy feel.



Ashbury

Back cushions are filled with polyester fibre, separated into two walled compartments.



Stravinski

Back cushions are filled with polyester fibre.

DECISION GUIDE

- Loose polyester fibre fill looks plump and luxurious at first, but the contents can settle and redistribute themselves. Better-quality cushions have walled compartments to keep the fibre in place.
- Feathers (or a feather and down mix) are another option, and while they need attention in terms of plumping and fluffing, longevity isn't as much of a problem in back cushions as in seat cushions.

SEAT CUSHIONS



Googee

Standard-duty polyurethane foam, with polyester wadding on the top and bottom. The sofa retailer offers a two-year warranty on the cushions.



Ashbury

Seat cushions are made from 'Premium comfort foam', which is medium-grade foam. There's polyester wadding on the top and bottom. It has a 10-year guarantee.



Stravinski

Premium grade 'Luxura' foam. There's a 'lifetime' guarantee (the sofa's lifetime, not yours).

DECISION GUIDE

- Are the cushions reversible? You'll get more life out of them if you can flip them (check the piping allows this), or at least swap them from side to side.
- The warranty on the cushions gives an indication of the quality of the foam.
- Feather-filled cushions are more susceptible to damage than foam or a foam/feather combination. Cushions with feathers in them may have shorter warranties.

CEREAL OFFENDERS UP THE FIBRE

LOWAN and KELLOGG'S have heeded the call by parents and experts to improve the nutrition profile of breakfast cereals aimed at children. KELLOGG'S has launched Coco Pops Coco Rocks, a version of the popular kids' cereal that uses wholegrain cereals rather than white rice. While it still provides too much sugar to be considered an everyday breakfast option, the increase in fibre is a vast improvement — from around 1% to just above 8%, or a little under 2.5 g of fibre per serve. If you want to give your kids an occasional treat, it's a better option than Coco Pops.

LOWAN has reformulated Kids Honey O's, the previous version of which was on our list of kids' cereals to avoid (see CHOICE, May 2007, or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on 'May 2007' under 'breakfast cereals' in the index). The new version's made from 55% wholegrain cereals, doubling the previous fibre content, and the salt content is low. It has less sugar than the original, but there are better options available for everyday eating.

To calculate how much fibre your child needs, add 5–10 to their age in years — so an eight-year-old requires 13–18 g of fibre per day. And if you're curious or concerned about the nutrition profile of other foods and drinks targeted at kids, go to our new free website to get the lowdown — www.choicefoodforkids.com.au.

Gatorade for kids

In a survey commissioned by GATORADE, 96% of mums said they thought water was the best hydrator. Not so, says GATORADE, as active 'tweens' (kids between nine and 13) need electrolytes and mineral salts replenished — which, perhaps not coincidentally, its new product GATORADE for Active Under 13s provides.

The sports drink company has enlisted the Australian cricket team's dietitian as well as several other athletes to help market the product, and it's also launching a campaign to 'raise awareness about the dangers of dehydration'.

Before you start stocking the fridge with GATORADE to save your kids from dehydration, step back and consider that those 96% of mums are probably right about water. Westmead Children's Hospital in NSW recommends water as the best choice, but says sports drinks may have a slight benefit after children have been engaged in high-intensity activity of over an hour's duration.

According to the Australian Institute



of Sport, electrolyte replacement is most important if an exercise session is prolonged and intense — such as when kids are involved in serious sports training, not just cricket on the beach or a school football game.

Also, as we reported in the March 2007 issue of CHOICE, experts suggest the rise in popularity of sports drinks and bottled water coincides with an increase in tooth decay in kids, because they don't contain fluoride. Most states in Australia add fluoride to tap water.

So, unless your offspring is a fledgling elite athlete, drinking plenty of water will keep them hydrated. ■



YOU ASKED ...

A CHOICE reader wrote to us with concerns about a product called DEVONDALE 100% Sparkling Apple Juice, which claims to have no added sugar or preservatives. What concerned our reader, though, was the listing of 'antioxidant (300)' in the ingredients list. Our reader thought an antioxidant was a preservative.

Antioxidant 300 is ascorbic acid, or vitamin C. It's mainly added to replace the vitamin C lost during processing, and it can also act as an antioxidant, preventing the browning of fruit. However, it's not considered a preservative in the technical sense of the word.

Allergy alert

A recent study into the number of children with food allergies confirms what most mothers have long suspected while dealing with school and preschool allergy policies and birthday parties with multiple allergic guests — more children are allergic to foods than ever before. The study found that over 12 years (1995 to 2006), the number of children under five who came to a clinic in the ACT with food allergies increased fourfold. In the same period, the number with asthma fell.

So we know food allergy is increasing, but there's a big gap in the knowledge about why. Reasons for the increase aren't known, but suspects up for investigation include:

- Greater exposure to potentially allergenic foods — for example, peanuts are much more widely found in all sorts of foods than they were previously.
- Exposure through creams and lotions, some of which contain peanut oil.
- Sensitisation to peanut protein through breastmilk — especially as mothers are more likely to have peanuts in their diets now.
- Prolonged breastfeeding is also being investigated as a possible factor, as is the increasing number of women having their babies when they're older.

Another study looking at children who are allergic to peanuts has made an interesting finding: some children are being misdiagnosed by tests with poor sensitivity and specificity. It found that more than one third of children who had been diagnosed as allergic to peanuts by a skin-prick test didn't react to peanuts in a hospital challenge, where they were given peanuts to eat under medical supervision (don't try this at home). Doctors may need to investigate peanut allergies more comprehensively in the future to be sure of a correct diagnosis.



B VITAMIN IMPORTANT FOR CONCEPTION

Everyone knows eating well is important for a healthy pregnancy, but a recent study suggests vitamin B₆ is particularly important if you're hoping to become pregnant.

A study of over 350 women found that getting enough B₆ increased their chance of becoming pregnant and reduced their risk of early miscarriage.

So what's the best way to get B₆? Foods rich in it include lean meat, fish and chicken, soy beans, nuts, vegetables, whole grains and fortified cereals — in other words, a healthy diet. ■

Taking your meds with you

You may have heard about new Federal Government regulations that limit the amount of liquids, aerosols and gels you can take in your hand luggage on flights into and out of Australia. It boils down to being allowed to take these fluids in containers no bigger than 100 mL, and all the containers must be in a single, transparent zip-lock bag (which can't be more than 1 L). Not complying can leave you binning your expensive cosmetics, stranded at the gate or, worse, charged with an offence.

So where does it leave you with medicines you might need on your flight? Prescription meds and essential non-prescription meds are exempt — within certain limits:

- It's advisable to carry a letter from your doctor about your medication needs.

- The name on the prescription label should match the name on your boarding pass.
- For non-prescription meds, such as cough syrup, you can only take a 'reasonable amount' for the duration of the flight (including any possible delays and diversions).
- Solid medications, like tablets, aren't affected.

If you're travelling with a baby, baby-related items like baby milk, sterilised water, baby juice and food, and wet wipes (all in 'reasonable quantities') are also exempt. However, you're expected to have the baby with you, so don't let them go through with another family member.

For more detailed information, go to www.dotars.gov.au/transport/security/aviation/LAG and make sure you know what's required before you decide what goes in your checked-in luggage and what's OK in the cabin.

Can my super fund go bust?

A CHOICE reader contacted us with concerns about the safety of his super, after the collapse of several property-based investment groups. "Can a super fund go bust?" Peter asks. "Is there a way of determining a safer super fund?"

The answer to these questions is yes, a fund can go bust, and maybe — super fund regulation protects you to some extent, but only with your own vigilance (or professional financial advice) can you monitor investment performance.

Most people's super funds are regulated by the Australian Prudential and Regulatory Authority (APRA). APRA licenses trustees and registers the funds under their trusteeship. This might give you some limited compensation if a fund fails. You can check that your fund is covered by contacting APRA on 1300 13 10 60 or by going to apra.gov.au/rse/.

However, just because a trustee is licensed doesn't mean the fund can't go bust or that it won't lose money. Recently, almost 500 fund members of Perth-based STRATEGIC CAPITAL SUPER FUND (SCSF) suffered losses as a result of alleged fraudulent conduct and theft perpetuated on the fund. The government can help to some degree — legislation allows financial assistance to funds that have suffered



losses due to fraudulent conduct or theft, but there's no compensation for bad investments. The Federal Government paid a financial assistance grant of nearly \$1.5 million to SCSF members to cover 90% of the alleged fraud losses, but won't cover another \$9 million lost due to poor investments by the fund.

Since 2001, 65 payments worth \$43.5 million have been paid to super fund members under these laws. Losses of another \$20 million fell outside the compensation legislation.

The same arrangements don't exist for so-called 'DIY' funds (self-managed super funds

or SMSFs), which are regulated by the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). Trustees of those funds — often 'mum and dad' investors — decide where to invest and there's less protection in place if their investments turn sour.

You need expertise, time and money to make an SMSF work. And caution is strongly urged with investment decisions, particularly after the collapse of risky property-based investment companies like FINCORP and WESTPOINT, with another, AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL RESERVE, going into voluntary liquidation and with BRIDGECORP FINANCE in receivership. ■

CASHBACK AUSTRALIA VOUCHERS

CASHBACK AUSTRALIA LTD is in liquidation. The company's 'deferred cash redemption program' issued vouchers for retailers to give to consumers, entitling them to refunds of up to 100% of the vouchers' face value after 13 to 51 months. Retailers contributed a percentage of the face value to a trust run by a company called AUSTRALASIAN ADMINISTRATIVE COMMERCIAL FUND 2005 (AACF), to cover payments to claimants.

The system relied on 'slippage' — the number of people who don't make a claim — leaving more money in the pot for those who claim. CHOICE readers with vouchers were paid as little as 10% to 20%, despite complying with the terms and conditions. AACF says the promotion's terms and conditions explained that payments for valid claims are "up to 100%" and that the promotion came "at no cost to the consumer".

CASHBACK was banned from trading in SA in 2006. In its 2005-06 annual report, the NSW Department of Fair Trading raised concerns

about the scheme's financial viability, the trust's independence and the cash redemption rules. WA's Department of Consumer and Employment Protection (in 2003) and Queensland's Office of Fair Trading (2002) had also issued warnings about CASHBACK; at the time, the company was an agent for Cashback America Inc, a relationship that ceased in mid-2003.

Claims aren't the retailer's responsibility and AACF continues to operate to service all potential claims. Queensland Fair Trading Minister, Margaret Keech, says consumers with unredeemed vouchers should contact AACF on 02 9439 3506 or at www.aacf.net. However, be careful — the strict terms of the agreement state that sending in your form before the 'redemption period' could invalidate your claim — read the conditions carefully.

If you have difficulty in getting your payment for a valid claim, you can lodge a complaint with your state's fair trading office.

Waterlogged

test

LG STEAM WASHER/DRYER

If you've listened to the marketing, you might be thinking the LG Combined Steam Washer and Dryer makes wash day more environmentally friendly. While it's true it's energy and water-efficient when used as a washer, that's not the whole story. When you use it as a dryer, it goes through an awful lot of water. The wash cycle uses comparatively little (107 L for a 9 kg load), but it guzzles down on average an astounding 74 L to dry a 5 kg load — that's more than you'd send down the drain flushing a modern, water-efficient toilet 12 times.

Why? Washer/dryers don't release hot, damp air into the laundry like normal clothes dryers. Instead they use water to condense the steam back to water, which is then flushed down the drain — and they can use a lot of water to do this.

Unfortunately the current water efficiency labelling system doesn't reflect this, as it's only based on usage during the wash cycle — but that's under review. CHOICE wants manufacturers to be required to label washer/dryers to show total water use.

Washing and drying

As a washer using a cold-water program (as in our normal CHOICE tests), the machine scored well overall (76%). But we also tested it on the 'eco steam' warm-water program featured in its marketing, with which it performed just a little better. However, despite its title, this warm-water cycle uses nearly three times the energy of the cold-water wash.

As for drying, it takes around 3.5 hours to dry a 5 kg load (you can't dry a full 9 kg wash load in one hit). Add to that the 100 minutes for a normal wash and there's your morning gone — and you've only dried about half the wash.

Steaming and refreshing

"If you're on the run, you can refresh your outfit in minutes with a special Steam Refresh cycle," the ads

proclaim. Unfortunately it's not as simple as popping yesterday's shirt in the machine while you're showering and having it ready when you are — you'll most probably still need to iron it, though the fact that it's slightly damp might make that easier. Steam Refresh also isn't recommended for 100% cotton clothing.

That aside, does it really freshen up clothes? We asked volunteers to sniff worn polycotton shirts we'd 'steam-refreshed'. More than half said they'd wear them once more, but less than half thought they smelt really fresh.

CHOICE's verdict

If space is at a premium, a washer/dryer saves you some room, but this one's larger than others we've tested. It's a good washer, but slow at drying and uses lots of water in the process. The 'steam refresh' function may come in handy but doesn't live up to all its promises.

If you have enough room for a separate washer and conventional dryer in your laundry (and can vent the hot air from the dryer to the outside), that's a better — and cheaper — choice. ■

IN A NUTSHELL

- Ads for the LG Combined Steam Washer and Dryer dub it "a revolution in the laundry", with claims it'll give you cleaner clothes and save energy, water, time and space. But our tests reveal it doesn't quite live up to its press.
- CHOICE wants the full amount of water used by washer/dryers — to dry as well as to wash — to be declared prominently on the water efficiency label.



DETAILS

Brand/model

LG Combined Steam
Washer and Dryer
WD-1248RD (champagne pink)

Price \$2874

Capacity (wash/dry) 9 kg / 5 kg

Dimensions (mm) 925 H x 635 W x 720 D

Also available in white and with 8/4 kg or
10/6 kg capacity.



Washer/dryers have separate energy labels for each component, but a water label only for the washer. There should be a requirement also to label the amount of water used by the condenser dryer.

PHOTOS: GENE BOSS

Four legs good?

Combine the increase in nature and experience-based tourism with the growing awareness of the benefits of physical fitness and it's little wonder walking holidays have become a popular way to enjoy leisure time.

For many years, bushwalkers overseas have used walking poles (also known as trekking poles or hiking poles) to increase their speed and endurance, to provide stability and balance and to reduce pressure on the lower joints. Related to both the ski pole and the humble walking stick, they're becoming increasingly common here too, as Australians discover their many benefits.

As they're relatively new on the market here, CHOICE wondered how easy they really are to use and how much punishment they'll stand up to. A group of experienced bushwalkers took five pairs of them into the bush to find out which they liked best, and the CHOICE lab put them through various strength tests — see *How we tested*, below, for more.

Pros

- Poles effectively turn you from a two-legged person into a quadruped. A percentage of your bodyweight is redistributed from your legs to your arms and upper body, so even though your overall aerobic exercise is increased and more calories are burned, the rate of exertion is reduced and it feels less strenuous. Endurance and speed are increased.
- The upper body gets a workout. Using poles keeps your chest more open and encourages a more upright

posture. Tension in your neck and shoulders is relieved and your back is loosened up. Circulation is improved. The rhythm generated promotes more relaxed breathing and increases stamina.

- Stress on your hips, ankles, knees and spine is reduced, in particular the shock to your knees going downhill.
- Poles supply extra climbing power to your arm and shoulder muscles to boost uphill movement.
- They lessen your chances of slipping, help prevent injury to the ankles in general and greatly assist people with existing knee and ankle problems, allowing them to go faster and further.
- Having four points of contact (your feet and the poles) provides additional balance, support and stability. Extra support higher up is particularly helpful for maintaining your balance while wearing a heavy backpack.
- Poles provide sideways stability in steep areas.
- There's less tendency to sink in soft or marshy ground.
- Poles can help you get around obstacles and cross difficult or slippery terrain such as creeks, rushing rivers, snow, ice, shale, loose debris, fallen trees and logs and when climbing boulders or rocks.
- If they're collapsible, they telescope up small enough to fit in a backpack (see *What to look for*, page 42, for more on this).

Cons

- Walking poles aren't for everyone or every situation — they have some drawbacks:
- As pole-walking increases cardiovascular demands

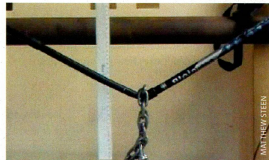
IN A NUTSHELL

- Walking poles can greatly enhance your bushwalking experience by providing support, reducing physical stress and offering a range of health benefits, but you also need to be aware of the downsides (see *Cons*, right).
- There's a number of features, styles and materials, so try before you buy (see *What to look for*, page 42).



HOW WE TESTED

- To check safety and performance, our testers subjected the poles to pressure using both tension (bending the pole) and compression (squashing the pole). They measured how much tension was needed before the poles either bent or snapped (see the photo, right) and what level of compression caused the locks to fail. After sufficient compression, all the poles' locks failed. However, this is a very rigorous test, and in normal use all the tested poles should be quite safe. Those with a higher performance score (see the table, page 42), though, should be able to withstand more punishment in an unusual circumstance — for example, if the pole slipped and you fell onto it.
- Four experienced bushwalkers also trialled each pole over two days in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. They assessed them for stability, balance, comfort (including the



strap and handle), ease of adjustment (pole length, handle strap, etc) and overall impression.

For a full list of factors included in the scoring see *Using the table*, page 43.



(even though you perceive your exertion to be lower), poles are unsuitable if you've got a weak heart or high blood pressure.

- The scraping noise and occasional vibrating and rattling of poles hitting hard surfaces can be irritating.
- There's a danger of being hit if you're walking too close to someone swinging their poles up behind them.
- They keep your hands full. Consulting a map, having a quick bite or taking a photo becomes very awkward and requires slowing down or stopping.
- Many people don't use them properly and they may be ineffective due to poor technique (see *How to use walking poles*, page 43).
- Telescopic poles can and occasionally do collapse — they can only take a limited amount of pressure. Use them as a walking aid, but don't expect them to take your full body weight. We tested them to see how much each model can take — see the table, page 42, for results.
- They can be a hindrance when walking on narrow trails hemmed in by thick brush, or travelling off-trail through vegetation or dense undergrowth.
- At around \$60–\$100 for a single mid-range pole, they're not cheap.

Walking poles can also damage the environment:

- Pole baskets (small plastic discs attached to the lower section of the pole near the tip, to keep poles from sinking into soft ground) get caught in low-lying plants and can damage vegetation.
- Pole tips can penetrate and churn up soil, tear up trails, and may hasten erosion along trail margins.
- Carbide tips can also damage lichen, chip rocks and leave white scratch marks on rock surfaces.

Not just for walking

Walking poles can also come in very handy when you're in the bush with limited resources. You could use a pole to:

- Stabilise the lower leg of an injured hiker or to make a crutch or splint.
- Probe the depth of mud or water.
- Hold up a makeshift bivouac shelter.
- Sweep aside spider webs, thorns or prickles.

Or as a:

- Tent pole (some tents are now specially designed to use walking poles).
- Reaching pole.
- Fishing rod.
- Camera mount (some poles are designed with camera monopod capability). >

what to buy



BLACK DIAMOND Switchback

Price \$119/pair

These poles performed very well in our strength tests, were a favourite with our trialists and are very compact. As the least expensive poles (per pair) tested, they represent great value, although the lack of anti-shock means they won't suit everyone.

Good points

- The top flick lock is easy to use and very quick to adjust when extending and retracting the section. The bottom pinch lock was considered easy "once you got used to it".
- Three out of four of our trialists rated these poles as their first or second favourite.
- Clear measurements printed on the top section make adjusting both poles to the same height very easy.
- The strap isn't fiddly or over-complicated to use and adjust, and there's just enough padding on it to cushion your hand comfortably.
- All the trialists thought the rubber grip on the handle was comfortable.
- Strong and sturdy, with little shudder.
- The shortest when retracted — easy to pack away or attach to your pack.
- Second highest tension resistance in the test.
- Second highest compression weight required before lock failure.

Bad points

- The lack of anti-shock was a negative for two of the trialists, who found the impact hard on a compacted surface, particularly going downhill.
- The heaviest of the tested poles.

LEKI Makalu Tour AS

Price \$190/pair, \$105/single pole

Strong in our tests, with a comfortable grip and a smooth and easy-to-use anti-shock mechanism, these poles were well-liked by trialists, although some found the strap a bit basic and rough.

Good points

- It was considered the best or second best pole by the trialists.
- Trialists thought the cork grip felt thinner than the rest and was comfortable, particularly when their hands got sweaty.
- The best of the anti-shock poles: the mechanism is smooth, cushions the poles' impact on the ground, switches on and off with a handle twist and has three settings (off, on, double).
- A strong, well balanced pole with little shudder.
- The highest compression weight required before lock failure.

Bad points

- The basic handle strap is uncomfortable. Some trialists found it rubbed their hand after extended use.
- It needs clearer section markings — for example, open and close direction indicators. Measurements are in a light grey that's hard to see.

GENE ROSS

Although most people use two poles, some prefer one. Two poles are highly recommended if you're carrying a heavy load, have joint problems or intend to use poles extensively.

what to look for

WHAT ARE NORDIC WALKING POLES?

While they look similar to the walking poles tested, Nordic poles are generally lighter, have a slightly different design and technique and are intended purely as aids to a form of exercise for health, rehabilitation and fitness. Nordic walking started decades ago in Finland to help cross-country skiers keep fit during summer. It can be practised anywhere and Nordic walkers are often seen in city parks, on beaches and in town. It's a fast-growing sport that's very popular in Europe and is gaining ground in Australia.

- **Try before you buy** Take them for a test run — or rather, walk — in the shop. Poles come in a wide range of prices, styles and materials and with a variety of features. Consider the following when you're choosing:
 - **One pole or two?** Although most people use two poles, some prefer one. Two poles are highly recommended if you're carrying a heavy load, have joint problems or intend to use poles extensively. Experiment to work out what feels best for you.
 - Poles can come as one whole piece, or have two or three sections. Three-section poles pack down to the **smallest size** for stowing in backpacks but are more expensive and slightly heavier than poles with two sections. All the CHOICE tested have three sections. Look for poles with a **telescopic adjustment** that can be used at different lengths. Try adjusting the length in the shop, to check how easy the sections are to hold and adjust; most have internal locking devices. Some poles and locks are easier to use and grip with cold, wet hands than others. Simple twist locks are the most common; other types include pinch and flick locks.
 - **Grips** can be straight or forward-angled. Forward-angled poles are more comfortable but they cost more and mean the pole isn't completely collapsible, as the tubing can't slide up inside the handle. They're therefore more awkward to pack in a backpack. The five CHOICE tested are all straight, collapsible poles.
 - Look for **soft handles** that have some give.

Cheaper poles have stiff plastic handles that can be very hard on the hands. The most comfortable handles are made of cork or cork/rubber compounds that mould to the hands with use.

- Some poles have an **anti-shock system** that absorbs impacts that could strain your wrists and elbows, especially on a downhill climb. Some poles let you turn the anti-shock off when you don't think it's necessary — on uphill climbs, shock absorbers will rob you of power and work against you.
- Most poles come with small removable **baskets** to keep them from sinking into soft ground. On snow or really soft ground, a larger basket is needed to prevent the pole from sinking too deep.
- **Carbide tips** provide good bite on hard surfaces and are more durable than aluminium. Some poles come with **removable rubber tips**, which you can use in sensitive environmental areas and which muffle the noise of poles striking rock.
- Aluminium is the most common **shaft material** and is lightweight and strong.
- Look for **clear markings** on the shaft so you can calibrate the right length for you easily and accurately.
- Look for **straps** with some sort of padding — those without it can chafe your wrists. Ensure the straps fit your hand well; some have differences between right and left hands to eliminate unnecessary padding that could cause friction.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			FEATURES		SPECIFICATIONS			
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Anti-shock	Grip material	Minimum length (pack size, cm)	Weight per pole (g)	Lock type	Contact
Black Diamond Switchback	78	75	80		Rubber	64	292	Flick (D) / Binary (E)	www.blackdiamondequipment.com
Leki Makalu Tour AS (A)	78	75	80	✓ (C)	Cork	70	284	Twist	www.leki.com
Expedition Equipment Trekker	65	70	60		Foam	68	286	Twist	www.exped.com
Komperdell Light AS	60	60	60	✓ (C)	Foam	75	256	Twist	www.komperdell.com
Fizan Alpin AS (B)	55	50	60	✓	Rubber	67	273	Twist	www.fizan.it

How to use walking poles

To get the most from your poles, you need to know how to adjust and use them correctly. The following are some general guidelines.

Length

- For general use on most terrain, adjust both poles to the same height — most poles have markings to calibrate length.
- Take care not to extend any section all the way, as this may stress the pole and cause it to bend or break.
- Make sure the sections are tightly secured so they don't give when all your weight is on them.
- Your elbow should form a right angle when the tips are on the ground and hands on the grips.
- For extended or very steep uphill use, shorten poles to compensate and increase leverage. Lengthening poles for downhill sections gives added support.
- When traversing hillsides, you may like to have one pole shorter than the other to simulate even ground.

Technique

Pole walkers use many different techniques. Most use 'opposite pole to forward leg' movements (if your right leg's going forward, so does the left

pole) and it's widely agreed that this technique provides the best balance and support. However, others prefer to move forward the pole on the same side as the forward foot. Some people plant a pole with each step, others only with every few steps.

You may find different techniques work better for particular situations. It'll probably take a bit of trial and error to discover what feels safest and most comfortable for you at the time.

Wrist straps

Wrist straps provide support so you don't need to grip the handle tightly, as this causes hand fatigue. A common mistake is to put your hand through the strap from above. Instead, put your hand through the strap from underneath, then grasp the handle with the strap under your palm, wrapping it over the wrist — see the photo, right. Pull the strap snug but not too tight. You can then guide the pole using the handle, but the weight is taken largely by the strap.

Care

After use and before retracting the pole's sections, wipe dirt and mud off and dry the poles thoroughly. Store them in a dry place. ■



PAUL SANTELMANN



USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Performance: 50%
- Ease of use: 50%

Performance score is made up of:

- Tension test: 50%
- Compression test: 50%

See *How we tested*, page 40, for details of the tests.

Ease of use score The four trialists assessed a range of factors — see *How we tested* for details.

Features All the tested models have:

- Telescopic function (can be extended and retracted), with three sections.
- Straight grip.
- Aluminium shaft.
- Carbide tip.
- Adjustable nylon strap.
- Replaceable basket.

Price Recommended retail, as of June 2007.

(A) Slight change to grip design due around August 2007, but the name and code will remain the same.

(B) Discontinued, but might still be available in some shops.

(C) Anti-shock can be turned off.

(D) Upper lock — lever is lifted to release and adjust pole length, then snapped closed to lock.

(E) Lower lock — lower section is pulled out until the red pins engage and lock. Red pins are pinched to release.

Price (\$)

119 / pair
190 / pair, 105 / pole
139 / pair
100 / pole
80 / pole

Sounds of silence

Ever noticed how first-class passengers seem to walk off the plane looking refreshed, even after a long-haul flight? Well, as well as better food, seats more comfortable than your own bed and personal pampering from ever-smiling flight attendants, these lucky people may have been enjoying high-quality active noise-cancelling headphones — reducing the constant drone of background aircraft noise that accompanies other air travellers.

But these headphones aren't only useful for air travel — noise from trains, air conditioners and the general background buzz of modern life can also be reduced to create a more relaxing environment. You can just use them to block out external noise, or you can plug them into an MP3 player and listen to music through them.

The CHOICE team tested 15 sets of active noise-cancelling headphones and found their effectiveness and comfort varied greatly between different models. With the best, such as the JABRA C820s and LOGITECH, we were impressed by how comfortable they were and

how well they managed to shut out noise. The BOSE QuietComfort 3's ability to reduce both ambient noise and your bank balance was also noteworthy.

With the models that rated lower than 50% for noise cancellation, though (the ones at the bottom of the table, page 46), we honestly think you'd be wasting your money.

How it works

You get a certain amount of what's called passive noise reduction simply by wearing some headphones — features like good padding that fully encompasses the ear can contribute to the overall reduction of background noise.

Active noise-cancelling headphones take it a step further. They incorporate a tiny microphone that 'listens' to soundwaves as they approach the ear and attempts to create a stream of soundwaves that are the exact opposite, cancelling them both out to create a pocket of silence between the microphone and your ear. While never perfect, this technology works most effectively >

IN A NUTSHELL

- Noise-cancelling headphones reduce intrusive ambient noise such as the drone of a plane.
- The best-performing models make you wonder how you ever coped without them in dealing with the hustle and bustle of everyday life.



what to buy



JABRA C820s

Price \$199

Type Around the ear

Good points

- Excellent combination of active and passive noise reduction.
- Trialists rated them very good to excellent for comfort overall.

Bad points

- Comparatively short battery life, although still good enough for a long-haul plane flight.
- Minimal adjustability of the headset may make it too big for small heads.



LOGITECH*

Price \$249

Type Good points

Type Around the ear

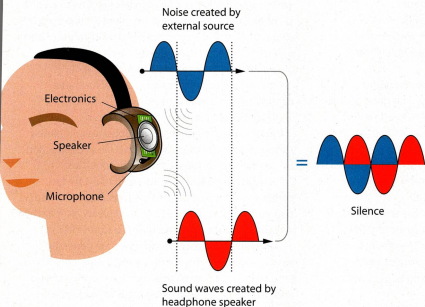
- Excellent combination of active and passive noise reduction.
- Trialists rated them very good to excellent for comfort overall.

Bad points

- Minimal adjustability of the headset may make it too big for small heads.

* Discontinued but may be still available in some shops.

HOW NOISE-CANCELLING HEADPHONES WORK



BOSE

QuietComfort 3

Price \$599

Type On the ear

Good points

- The best active noise cancellation by a significant margin.
- Very good overall noise reduction.
- Trialists rated them very good for comfort overall.
- Removable ear muffs are very easy to clean.

Bad points

- Passive noise reduction isn't as good as the top two models.
- You can't listen to music with noise cancelling turned off/flat batteries.
- Minimal adjustability of the headset may make it too big for small heads.
- Expensive.

BOSE

QuietComfort 2

Price \$499

Type Around the ear

Good points

- Good overall noise reduction.
- Removable ear muffs are very easy to clean.
- Trialists rated them very good to excellent for comfort overall.

Bad points

- Passive noise reduction isn't as good as the top three models.
- You can't listen to music with noise cancelling turned off/flat batteries.
- Minimal adjustability of the headset may make it too big for small heads.
- Expensive.



HOW WE TESTED

- A panel of trialists wore the headphones with noise cancellation activated for 60 minutes and commented on the overall comfort. We used the results to determine the comfort score.
- For the ease of use score, a CHOICE tester assessed each pair of headphones for the range of adjustability and ease of adjustment to fit different-sized heads; the ease of packing them into any supplied case; and ease of cleaning the various components.
- The National Acoustic Laboratories determined the degree of noise cancellation, using synthesised pink noise as well as recordings of ambient sound from a city train and a domestic jet aircraft. A combination of active and passive noise reduction was measured to determine the overall noise cancellation score. Passive reduction was measured with the headphones turned off, with a separate active cancellation figure derived through analysis of both the passive and overall noise reduction results.
- For the battery test, a pink noise source was set up near the headphones and noise cancellation turned on. The tester twice measured how long the batteries lasted, repeating the test a third time if there was more than 10% difference between the two tests. The battery life shown in the table is the average of all tests; it didn't form part of the overall score, as the batteries of all models lasted longer than a long-haul flight.



about the rest

- Some people find around-ear headphones too bulky and warm after prolonged periods. If you prefer a compact on-the-ear set, the two SENNHEISER models took the top two places for ease of use and were rated fairly comfortable. The PXC300 just outdid the PXC150 for noise cancelling, but at over \$100 less, the PXC150 represents good value, even if it doesn't come with the nice carry case of its more expensive sibling.
- The PHILIPS SHN9500 was fairly comfortable and is easy to use. It has a detachable cable and a mute button, so you can hear the flight attendant running through the gourmet options without even removing your headphones.
- Although some of the rest of the models are cheaper, we don't think they're worth bothering with. Even on a budget, it's hard to go past the top-scoring JABARA for \$199 — not much more expensive than a good pair of ordinary headphones.

Comfort is crucial to the performance of these headphones. Different-sized heads and ears and areas of sensitivity mean that a set that feels great for one person may be uncomfortable for another.

< with constant low-frequency ambient noise such as the drone of a plane, train or air conditioner.

Active noise cancellation isn't as effective for intermittent sounds, such as a pen dropping on a table or a person talking — these sounds will still get through.

If the air conditioner at work really bugs you and you like listening to music, headphones with good active noise cancellation, such as the BOSE QuietComfort 3, which can also be plugged into your MP3 player, may be a godsend, but if the person chatting away in the next booth is part of the problem, you might want to try the JABRA C820s or LOGITECH headphones, which offer good passive noise reduction as well.

However, some people find passive noise reduction makes them feel shut out from those around them. Good active noise cancellation, on the other hand, produces a quieter personal environment while allowing you to hear someone trying to get your attention.

The noise cancellation function of the headphones is operated by batteries. All except the BOSE models let you still use the headphones to listen to music if the batteries are flat, without noise cancellation in action.

Comfort counts

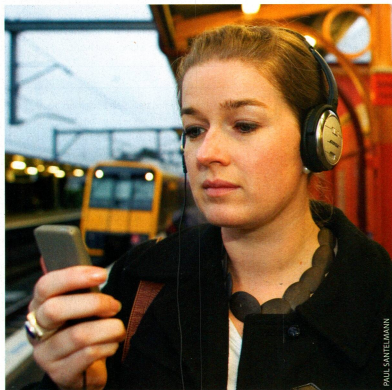
While some models scored highly for comfort, not one set of headphones was rated excellent on this front by all our trialists. Different-sized heads and ears and areas of sensitivity mean that a set that feels great for one person may be uncomfortable for another.

Comfort over a long period is crucial for these headphones and all but two (the JVC and PHILIPS SHN5500) got at least a 'good' rating for it.

Circumaural ('around ear') headphones completely surround your ear, providing added passive reduction to aid their active noise-cancelling properties. The cushioning effect may also help make them comfortable to wear for long periods. The downside is that you may find they get hot and sweaty after a while and they're often large and bulky to store and carry.

Supra-aural ('on ear') headphones are generally smaller. They rest on your ears, providing more airflow around them. However, they may keep out less noise and may not suit you as some press rather firmly on the ears.

So before you commit up to \$600 for a set of these headphones, try them out first — and leave them on for as long as the salesperson will allow. ■



PAUL SANTERMAN

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Type	Overall score (%)	Comfort score (%)
Jabra C820s	Around the ear	87	86
Logitech (A)	Around the ear	87	88
Bose QuietComfort 3	On the ear	82	82
Bose QuietComfort 2	Around the ear	79	86
Sennheiser PXC 300	On the ear	76	76
Sennheiser PXC 150	On the ear	75	76
Philips SHN9500	Around the ear	70	76
Acoustic Research ARH500	Around the ear	67	76
iRhythms A-9900	Around the ear	61	70
Panasonic RP-HC150	Around the ear	58	74
JVC HA-NC80	On the ear	54	52
Sony MDR-NC6	On the ear	54	74
Koss QZ PRO	Around the ear	53	70
Panasonic RP-HC70	On the ear	52	70
Philips SHN5500	On the ear (B)	39	56

- **Volume control** — preferably on the cable — can come in handy, although if you're listening to music on an MP3 player you can usually alter its volume without too much trouble.
- **Noise cancelling on/off control** If the batteries go flat, you won't be left without music.
- **Detachable cable** If you just want a quiet environment to listen to nothing at all, you don't need it plugged into your music — a detachable cable keeps it out of your way.
- **Carry case** Particularly when you're travelling, a good hard case protects your headphones and keeps extra attachments in order, as with the JABRA, below. A soft pouch can be easier to pack but doesn't give as much protection.



GENE ROSS

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Comfort: 30%
- Ease of use: 20%
- Noise cancellation: 50%

Noise cancellation The score ranks the reduction in noise achieved by the headphones when combining both active and passive elements.

Active cancellation The result, indicated in decibels, shows the ability of the headphones' noise reduction circuitry to eliminate low-frequency noise, while the **passive reduction** figure shows the ability of the headphone ear pads to keep external noise out with the active noise cancelling turned off. See *How it works*, page 44, for more on this.

Features See *What to look for*, left.

Prices Recommended retail, as of June 2007.

* All the AAA batteries can be rechargeable or non-rechargeable. The Bose QuietComfort 3's Li-ion battery is rechargeable.

(A) Discontinued but may still be available in shops.

(B) With a band at the back of the neck.

(C) Comes with a charger with international adapters and an additional battery.

					FEATURES				SPECIFICATIONS				
Case or use	Noise cancellation score (%)	Active cancellation (dB)	Passive reduction (dB)	Battery life (hours)	Volume control	Can be used with noise-cancelling turned off	Cable detachable	Carry case	Cable length (cm)	Number and type of batteries*	Weight (g, with batteries and cable)	Contact	Price (\$)
0	94	14.3	8.3	34		✓	✓	Hard case	161	1 x AAA	187	www.jabra.com	199
4	95	15.9	7.8	>42		✓	✓	Hard case	160	1 x AAA	200	www.logitech.com	249
8	80	19.5	4.8	>42			✓	Hard case	142	1 x Li-ion (C)	157	www.bose.com.au	599
2	74	13.3	3.9	>42			✓	Hard case	170	1 x AAA	196	www.bose.com.au	499
6	67	11.9	4.0	>42		✓		Hard case	195	2 x AAA	139	www.sennheiser.com	320
00	64	11.2	4.0	>42		✓		Pouch	195	2 x AAA	133	www.sennheiser.com	198
2	62	10.6	3.3	>42		✓	✓	Hard case	129	1 x AAA	211	www.phillips.com.au	250
8	65	11.7	3.3	37	On earpiece	✓		Hard case	164	2 x AAA	190	www.musicway.com.au	199
6	49	7.7	2.7	34	On cable	✓		Pouch	192	1 x AAA	196	www.irhythms.com	99
6	37	6.3	3.1	>42		✓		Pouch	155	1 x AAA	163	www.panasonic.com.au	150
8	41	4.7	3.3	>42		✓		Pouch	156	1 x AAA	166	www.jvc.com.au	79
4	34	7.9	1.1	>42		✓		Pouch	152	1 x AAA	147	www.sony.com.au	199
0	40	5.9	2.0	>42	On cable	✓			131	2 x AAA	289	02 9630 1955	180
6	35	3.8	0.9	>42	On cable	✓			153	1 x AAA	132	www.panasonic.com.au	119
6	33	2.5	2.7	36	On cable	✓			186	1 x AAA	92	www.phillips.com.au	150

GPS road test

Getting from A to B is now easier than ever for the navigationally challenged, thanks to nifty in-car GPS navigation systems. These can pinpoint the user's location to within less than 10 metres, allowing you to navigate to an exact street address.

GPS (Global Positioning System) devices are still gaining in popularity and the technology is constantly being updated, with a swift turnover of new models. The good news for consumers is that, with new brands and models constantly finding their way onto the market, the increased competition means prices are coming down.

We tested 10 entry-level portable car GPS systems and also retested a previously tested system that's still available (the GARMIN Nüvi 310), as we've slightly altered our test method.

While our top-scoring model, the GARMIN StreetPilot c510, received an impressive overall score of 84%, all our five top GPS systems are worth a look, as there's little between their overall scores.

How do they work?

Car GPS systems consist of a multi-channel GPS receiver, a map database in an internal flash memory (similar to that used in a digital camera), a processor (computer) to calculate routes, travel distances and times and so on, a screen to display maps and route instructions and a speaker (or two) to give verbal instructions.

They're portable in the sense that they can be installed in your car in less than a minute and can be easily removed and used in another vehicle or, in the case of some models, even used while walking. Some are bulkier and harder to carry than others; the lightest is the GARMIN Nüvi 310, which weighs only 150 g — just a little more than the average mobile phone — and can easily be slipped into your pocket, while the GARMIN StreetPilot c510 is 257 g and bulky.

Factory-installed car GPS systems (available in more and more new cars) are significantly more expensive than the ones we tested and usually feature a screen integrated into the dashboard and a processor that communicates with the car's computer. >

IN A NUTSHELL

- Our top five GPS systems all crossed the finish line with very good overall scores.
- Map data can be updated once a year — but it'll cost you.

what to buy



GARMIN StreetPilot c510

Price \$549

Good points

- Excellent safety score.
- Equal-best screen tested.
- Very good in-car performance score.
- Has an optional safety mode to restrict some operations by the driver.
- Has effective 'text to speech' function, which means the system can use street names when 'talking' to the driver.

Bad points

- Relatively bulky shape — not pocketable.



NOVOGO T700

Price \$499

Good points

- Excellent safety score.
- Very good in-car performance score.
- Has an optional safety mode to restrict some operations by the driver.

Bad points

- None to mention.



HOW WE TESTED

- Our testers checked the in-car performance of the systems by assessing the reliability of the voice commands, the timeliness and accuracy of turn instructions and the directions and errors in map data. They also checked satellite reception in Sydney's CBD, and for the 'points of interest' test they looked for addresses and travel destinations outside Sydney, including checking to see if a route between Adelaide and Kangaroo Island, using a ferry, could be calculated.
- For ease of use, testers looked for a Quick Install guide, a detailed instruction manual and a secure windscreen mount. They assessed brightness and clarity of the screen, usability of controls and ease of navigating the menus. They checked maps for readability, timing of turn instructions and information display readability. They also checked the screens' adjustability, and viewing clarity in daylight, bright sunlight and at night.
- Our team assessed operational safety by looking for clear warnings about the need to obey traffic rules even if the system occasionally gives contradictory instructions, checking whether there's a safety mode limiting use of controls and whether controls are large enough to operate while driving.
- They also checked if the systems worked after three hours in a temperature-controlled oven at 60°C to simulate being in a car on a hot summer's day. All models still worked fine.



about the rest

- The UNIDEN GNS 8350 and ROAD ANGEL Navigator 6000 achieved very good in-car performance scores but both have some small onscreen buttons that are hard to use. The ROAD ANGEL also got the lowest ease of use score.
- The VDO Dayton PN 2050 got the lowest in-car performance score (though it was still good at 71%), and our testers found its voice unpleasant.
- The SHINCO nav:m8 GM-400S, ALTIMA A600 and DOTEI Smart Navi all received comparatively low ease of use scores.



GARMIN Nuvi 310

Price \$649

Good points

- Excellent safety score.
- Very good in-car performance score.
- Very good quality of displayed data.
- Very good display in daylight and at night.
- The smallest, lightest model.
- Has a good printed manual.
- Has a safety mode (but it's 'off' by default).
- Large onscreen buttons that could be operated while driving if necessary.
- Can connect to some Bluetooth mobiles.

Bad points

- Poor for interstate points of interest.
- Refers to Australian states as counties.
- 'Text to speech' is hard to understand in a noisy car.



NAVMAN F20

Price \$499*

Good points

- Very good in-car performance score.
- Has dedicated buttons on the front to find the nearest service stations and parking (as long as they're in the map data).

Bad points

- Only allows navigation from your current location, so you can't plan a route in advance.
- Distance to the next turn is in figures too small to easily read while driving.

** Discontinued but may still be available in some shops.*



TOMTOM One New Edition

Price \$499

Good points

- Very good sound quality.
- Very good in-car performance score.
- Equal-best screen score.
- Has an optional safety mode to restrict some operations by the driver.
- Can connect to some Bluetooth mobile phones.

Bad points

- No printed manual.
- The mount can be hard to remove from the windscreen.

The technology falters during inner-city driving. Reception is affected by tall buildings and tunnels — when driving through Sydney's CBD, every system lost track of the vehicle's position at some stage.

< New technology

Based on the models tested, it's now common for GPS systems to have an inbuilt MP3 player, but in most models (SHINCO and UNIDEN excluded), it can't be used at the same time as the navigating system.

The TOMTOM One New Edition and GARMIN Nüvi 310 also have Bluetooth capabilities, which means that if your mobile phone also does, the GPS can act as a hands-free device. This means you have one less thing to plug into the cigarette lighter socket, and it may encourage those without an existing hands-free mobile not to break the law. (However, plenty of research has shown that even using a hands-free phone in a car makes you more likely to have an accident.)

Some of the models also warn you of red light cameras, speed cameras and school zones. Although some also let you know when you're exceeding the speed limit, we found most of the warnings were incorrect — presumably because the map data isn't up to date.

Where technology really falters, however, is during inner-city driving. GPS works by 'taking a fix' on orbiting satellites, and our testers found reception is affected by tall buildings, which can create 'canyons' in the city, and tunnels. When our testers were driving through Sydney's CBD, every single system lost track of the vehicle's position at some stage.

The map issue

All the tested models use map data supplied by either Destinator or Sensis/Whereis and, although testers didn't find any obvious differences in the data itself, they did find the models display different levels of detail and categorise 'points of interest' in a different way. Australian map data is updated once a year and can be purchased either from the retailer or easily downloaded from the manufacturer's website — but it's not cheap (see *Australian map data*, left).

Our testers found several glitches caused by outdated data, such as the appearance on systems of non-existent roundabouts and being advised to turn right where there were signposts indicating that this wasn't possible. However, small changes in map data are unlikely to seriously delay travel time — though they could easily increase the road rage quotient. ■



what to look for

- **Data entry** Check how easy it is to enter addresses and routing preferences. Ideally, check a few destinations in the area you're most likely to use the GPS system to see how well the mapping data covers it.
- **Display** This should be large and glare-free, and show the information you want to see — such as a two- or three-dimensional map view, distance to the next turn, current street name, time of arrival, and distance to destination.
- **Voice instructions** Make sure these are clear and loud enough to understand over car noise.
- **Installation and portability** Check how easy the system is to install, but also how easy it is to remove and carry — you're likely to take it with you when you park, as it would be an attractive target for thieves if you left it on the windscreen.
- Check it allows you to **store your home address** and to select a location on the displayed map.

Features they (almost) all have

- Li-Ion battery.
- Colour LCD display in landscape format.
- Touchscreen.
- USB PC connection.
- SD memory card slot.
- Languages: You can pick from a number of

AUSTRALIAN MAP DATA

Map data can be updated from the manufacturers' websites and/or retailers as it becomes available (currently once a year):

- ALTINA: \$60
- DOTEL: \$179
- GARMIN: \$160
- NAVMAN: \$179
- NOVOGO: \$249
- UNIDEN: \$199
- VDO Dayton: \$169
- ROAD ANGEL, SHINCO, TOMTOM: Price not available.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			
	Overall score (%)	In-car performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Operational safety score (%)
Brand / model (in rank order)				
Garmin StreetPilot c510	84	85	86	90
Novogo t700	83	81	85	100
Garmin Nüvi 310	80	82	82	90
Navman F20 (A)	80	83	82	88
Tomtom One New Edition	80	84	91	40
Uniden GNS 8350 (A)	75	82	75	70
VDO Dayton PN 2050	73	71	76	88
Road Angel Navigator 6000	72	85	63	68
Dotel Smart Navi	69	82	66	38
Shinco nav.m8 GM-400S	68	74	69	52
Altina A600	66	72	68	48

languages for the display and voice instructions. Only the ALTINA, DOTEL, ROAD ANGEL and UNIDEN give onscreen and spoken instructions in English only.

- Option to calculate the fastest or shortest route — they aren't always the same.
- Full route display. This allows you to view the entire route before zooming to a more detailed view.
- Option of two- or three-dimensional map display.
- Display car speed, distance to destination, estimated time of arrival, street name and distance to the next turn.
- Volume control for voice instructions.
- Points of interest marked: ATMs (except the UNIDEN), schools, police stations, car parks, petrol stations, airports, railway stations, doctors (except the GARMIN models), hospitals and fixed speed cameras (except the NAVMAN, NOVOGO and UNIDEN).
- Option to search for a point of interest.

Features in the table

- **Walking option** This lets you plot a route for pedestrians — for example, ignoring one-way streets, or using paths through parks.
- **Bluetooth** The system can connect with some Bluetooth-enabled mobile phones — check the list of compatible phones before you buy, if this is important for you.
- **MP3 player** You can use your GPS to play your MP3 files — although not usually while you're using it to navigate.



Some models let you select a destination by just touching a street or point of interest on the screen.

- **Routing options** You can choose to exclude toll roads, unsealed roads or highways from your programmed route.
- **Upload points of interest** You can upload additional points of interest (for example, from manufacturers' websites) and/or enter your own.
- **Fuzzy look-up** If the system can't find the street name in the suburb you've entered, it'll search for it in neighbouring suburbs.

		FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS			
Performance score (%)	Walking option	Bluetooth	MP3 player	Route options: no tolls / no unsealed roads / no highways	Upload points of interest	Fuzzy look-up	Dimensions (H x W x D, mm)*	Weight (g)	Contact	Price (\$)	
0				✓ / - / ✓	✓		83 x 108 x 53	257	www.garmin.com	549	
3	✓			✓ / ✓ / ✓			73 x 122 x 21	193	www.novogo.com	499	
5	✓	✓	✓	✓ / ✓ / ✓	✓		73 x 98 x 22	150	www.garmin.com	649	
5				✓ / ✓ / -	✓	✓	82 x 117 x 25	194	www.navman.com	499	
3	✓	✓		✓ / - / ✓	✓		83 x 107 x 26	184	www.tomtom.com	499	
8			✓	✓ / ✓ / ✓			79 x 116 x 32	194	www.uniden.com.au	529	
0		✓ (A)	✓	✓ / - / ✓			81 x 106 x 24	196	www.vdodayton.com	599	
5	✓		✓	✓ / - / ✓		✓	77 x 92 x 21	187	www.roadangel.com.au	699	
7	✓		✓	✓ / - / -			79 x 111 x 39	188	www.dotel.co.kr	449	
2	✓		✓	✓ / - / ✓	✓		134 x 75 x 27	244	www.shinco.com	499	
5	✓		✓	✓ / - / -			82 x 117 x 24	194	www.altina.com.tw	399	

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- In-car performance: 45%
- Ease of use: 40%
- Operational safety: 10%
- Points of interest: 5%

For more on the tests see *How we tested*, page 49.

Features For an explanation of features, see *What to look for*, above.

Price Recommended retail as of June 2007.

* Depth is measured with the antenna folded against the body, if applicable.

(A) Discontinued but may still be available in some shops.

(B) Optional docking station.

Green machines

The vast majority of household appliances are designed to make our lives easier. And while there's no doubt many of them improve our quality of life, our awareness of the impact many of these machines can have on the environment seems to have reached an all-time high. But at least for dishwashers there's some good news coming out of the kitchen.

Clean and green

Contrary to what many of us might assume, dishwashers these days generally use a lot less water than they used to — even less than good old-fashioned hand washing if you use them right. The average water consumption for 13 dishwashers CHOICE tested back in 1993 was 25.4 L; for the 10 machines tested this time, the average was 17.6 L — a reduction of 31%.

Although the way you hand wash will dictate how much water is used, a US study in 2000 estimated that water usage for hand washing could be anywhere between 34 and 90 L just for one meal — a lot more than a modern dishwasher uses.

But to keep your dishwasher green, you'll need to make sure you use it correctly. Only wash a full load, scrape rather than rinse your dishes beforehand and choose a water and energy-efficient machine.

A square peg?

With so many dishwashers on the market, it can be hard to work out which model is for you. This time we tested the SMEG STH905, a much wider, squatter unit than other machines, with an eye-catching design that may appeal if you have a taste for the unusual in your kitchen. There's a photo of it on page 54.

But in terms of overall performance, ease of use and particularly soil removal, the SMEG STH905 falls below



HOW WE TESTED

- Our testers checked how well the machines tackled a full load of dirty dishes by placing equal amounts of egg yolk, spinach and baby cereal onto plates, butter onto saucers, tomato juice into glasses and tea into cups. They also put egg yolk and cereal onto cutlery.
- They then left everything to dry for 15 to 18 hours before loading it all into the machines. The dishes were then washed, using the auto-sensing wash program if the machine has one or a normal cycle if it doesn't, and dried.
- Our team tested each machine at least twice and then averaged the scores. They used a standard method to score, based on the number of specks of food remaining on the tableware or the size of larger stains.
- Our testers also scored the machines for drying. The scoring is based on the number of drops and/or streaks of water left on the dishes one hour after the end of the wash. The doors were left closed at the end of the drying run. Different manufacturers make different recommendations about leaving doors open or closed — check your machine's manual to get the best results.
- Our testers also measured the water and energy used during a cycle, and how easy it is to load the dishes. They used large plates (29 cm in diameter) and long-stemmed glasses (21 cm tall) to help assess the versatility of the baskets in each machine.

IN A NUTSHELL

- Dishwashers are no longer water-wasteful — in fact, they use less water than you would washing the dishes by hand.
- In many models, you'll struggle to fit tall glasses and large plates at the same time.

average. This machine is extremely light on water use, and our testers thought it just doesn't use enough water to get your dishes properly clean. Another problem is that it's quite difficult to fit a standard full 12-place setting into the basket. And of course it won't fit into the usual 60 cm wide slot for a dishwasher. >



WHAT TO BUY

A Best Buy is a good performer from a brand with a reliable track record, whose purchase price and running costs combined are among the lowest in the test. The other machines in the *What to buy* list are top performers but cost more to buy and/or run, or we don't have reliability data for them.

If price is your most important consideration, the CONIA CDW1211 (at just \$499) is cheap to buy and run and, while it didn't make the *What to buy* list, it still scored well overall.

Our new reliability figures (far right) show that while the LG LD-1204W scored well in our test, LG as a brand has a comparatively poor reliability record for dishwashers: with 25% of LG dishwashers having needed repair in the 12 months up to our survey, it's second bottom in the list for reliability. Unfortunately not enough people told us about their experiences with AEG dishwashers to give us reliability information about this brand.

MIELE G1220SC	\$1649
BOSCH Logixx AquaVario SGV67T13AU (A)	\$2449
LG LD-1204W	\$999
NEW AEG F40760 Favorit Sensorlogic	\$1099
NEW AEG F86080UM Favorit Sensorlogic	\$1599
ELECTROLUX Dishlex DX302 (A) BEST BUY	\$949
WESTINGHOUSE SB915	\$949

(A) Discontinued but may still be available in some shops.

New models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order. For profiles of other models in the list, see the Jan/Feb 2007 or July 2006 issues of *CHOICE* or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on those issues under 'dishwashers'.



AEG F40760 Favorit Sensorlogic

Price \$1099

Freestanding

Good points

- Excellent drying performance and very good washing performance.
- The top basket is easy to adjust and tall glasses fit at the same time as large plates.
- Has delayed start and a concealed element.

Bad points

- Nothing in particular.



AEG F86080UM

Price \$1599

Has to be built in

Good points

- Excellent drying performance and very good washing performance.
- The top basket is easy to adjust and tall glasses fit at the same time as large plates.
- Has delayed start, a time-to-go display and a concealed element.

Bad points

- Nothing in particular.

How reliable have subscribers found them?

We asked subscribers whether their dishwasher (bought in or after 2000) had needed repairs in the previous 12 months. Overall, 15% had done, making dishwashers one of the least reliable appliances in our survey (which included eight appliances altogether). Despite this, an average of 80% said they would buy the same brand again.

Differences of 9% or more are meaningful. The numbers in brackets are the number of responses we received for that brand.

Unfortunately we didn't receive enough information to have reliability data on the following brands — AEG, ARISTON or BAUMATIC.

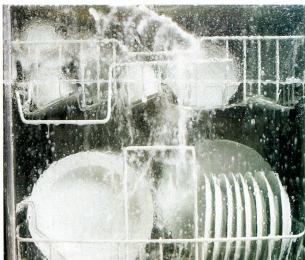
PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

ALL DISHWASHERS (5049)	85
BOSCH (318)	95
MIELE (697)	92
WHIRLPOOL (152)	90
WESTINGHOUSE (414)	89
SIMPSON (146)	88
BLANCO (127)	87
DISHLEX/ELECTROLUX DISHLEX (790)	87
ASKO (350)	83
FISHER & PAYKEL (830)	80
SMEG (140)	79
LG (288)	75
KLEENMAID (152)	71



This refers only to newly tested models — to find out more about machines tested in the past, refer to the table.

- The ASKO D3121WHXL, BAUMATIC BAD6002 and WHIRLPOOL ADP6000WH all perform very well in terms of water efficiency, and the ASKO and WHIRLPOOL are also very good dryers. But tall glasses can't be fitted at the same time as large plates in the BAUMATIC or WHIRLPOOL, which could cause headaches. The BOSCH Lifestyle Automatic is water-efficient but has similar problems with tall glasses and large plates. The KLEENMAID DW34X also struggles to fit both sets of items.
- The FISHER & PAYKEL DW60CDW1 doesn't dry the dishes well but washes well and is water-efficient.



To keep your dishwasher green, you need to use it correctly. Only wash a full load, scrape rather than rinse your plates beforehand and choose a water and energy-efficient machine.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE											FEATURES
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Washing score (%)	Drying score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Water efficiency score (%)	Energy used (kWh)	Water used (L)	Noise (dB)	Cycle time (min)	Height-adjustable top basket	Foldable /
Miele G1220SC (A)	84	77	98	88	68	87	1.37	15	40	136	✓	F, F
Bosch Logixx AquaVario SGV67T13AU (B)	82	72	97	88	69	87	1.34	15	40	106	✓	F
LG LD-1204W	82	75	97	83	76	79	1.11	18	54	101	✓	F
# AEG F40760 Favorit Sensorlogic (A)	80	88	91	85	60	61	1.62	25	48	115	✓	F
# AEG F8080UM Favorit Sensorlogic (A)	80	81	92	85	65	67	1.46	23	48	104	✓	F
Electrolux Dishlex DX302 (A) (B)	80	74	92	95	64	77	1.52	19	49	105	✓	F
Westinghouse SB915 (A)	80	81	89	95	54	76	1.84	19	48	107	✓	F
Conia CDW1211	78	72	86	73	77	81	1.07	17	54	149	✓	F, R
# Fisher & Paykel DW60CDW1 (A)	78	81	69	88	76	84	1.11	16	48	108	✓	F
Westinghouse SB907 (A)	78	77	80	88	66	79	1.44	18	52	103	✓	F
Miele G1140SC (A)	77	75	90	78	60	76	1.63	19	41	138	✓	
Whirlpool ADP6940 Auto Clean 6th Sense (A)	77	68	89	66	68	96	1.36	12	41	148	✓	F
Ariston L63X	76	69	83	66	72	89	1.24	14	52	88	✓	R
# Asko D3121WHXL 8-Steel System (B)	75	68	89	73	62	83	1.58	17	47	147		
Blanco BFDW6W (A)	75	76	83	73	63	70	1.55	21	45	98	✓	F
Fisher & Paykel Dishdrawer DD603M (A)	75	69	86	83	66	76	1.44	19	53	126	na	R
# Whirlpool ADP6000WH (A)	75	64	92	53	79	84	1.02	16	49	149	✓	F
Asko D3111 8-Steel System (A) (B)	74	80	71	73	61	81	1.61	17	45	128		
# Baumatic BAD6002 (A)	74	61	78	78	83	85	0.88	16	53	135	✓	F
Simpson Eziset 528B70WJ (A)	74	70	77	88	67	78	1.42	18	50	103	✓	F
Blanco BFDW4W (A)	73	70	80	45	74	84	1.17	16	48	158		
# Smeg STH905 (C)	73	59	80	63	74	99	1.16	10	45	101	na	F
Electrolux EX500ISC	72	70	73	83	68	73	1.35	20	44	105	✓	F
Simpson Eziset 528B50 (A)	72	76	64	88	64	72	1.49	21	52	115	✓	F
# Bosch SGS55M98AU Lifestyle Automatic (A) (B)	71	72	67	63	64	87	1.51	15	44	136	✓	F
Ariston LD87	70	69	58	79	78	76	1.04	19	48	85	✓	F
Fisher & Paykel Nautilus DW691ED WH (A) (B)	70	78	42	70	87	80	0.74	18	44	73	✓	F
Bosch Classic Electronic SGS53EO2AU	68	65	65	61	80	74	0.97	20	45	86	✓	F
# Kleenmaid DW34X (A)	68	69	70	48	64	79	1.51	18	43	96	✓	F
Fisher & Paykel Nemo DW681ES WH (A) (B)	67	64	47	70	88	81	0.71	17	45	74	✓	

The SMEG STH905 may look stylish, but it didn't wash well and is comparatively hard to use. It's also too wide to fit into a standard 60 cm slot for a dishwasher.



For people with a disability

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre (NSW) assessed the newly tested models for suitability for people with certain disabilities.

- If you're a wheelchair user, none of these models is particularly easy to use. However, as mentioned in the July 2006 issue of CHOICE, a single FISHER & PAYKEL Dishdrawer positioned at a suitable height is a good option.
- For people with upper limb dysfunction, both AEGs scored well for ease of using controls, opening and

				SPECIFICATIONS					COSTS	
Hose	Half-load option	Eco wash	Fast wash	Dimensions (H x W x D, cm)	Water connection	Place settings	Type	Contact	Running cost (\$ / 10 years)	Price (\$)
			✓	85 x 60 x 60	C rec	12	FW	www.miele.com.au	806	1649
	✓		✓	81 x 60 x 57	C rec	14	BI	www.bosch.com.au	789	2449
	✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	C rec	12	FW	www.lge.com.au	701	999
		✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	C only	12	FW	www.andico.com.au	980	1099
		✓	✓	82 x 60 x 57	C only	12	BI	www.andico.com.au	882	1599
		✓	✓	82 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	www.dishlex.com.au	899	949
		✓		82 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	www.westinghouse.com.au	1078	949
		✓	✓	85 x 60 x 58	H or C	12	FW	www.pebble-ltd.com.au	647	499
		✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	www.fp.com.au	676	899
			✓	82 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	www.westinghouse.com.au	856	849
			✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	12	FW	www.miele.com.au	964	1399
✓	✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	ns	12	FW	www.whirlpool.com.au	785	1249
		✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	C rec	12	FW	www.aristonchannel.com.au	728	1149
		✓	✓	86 x 60 x 57	C rec	14	BI	www.asko.com.au	927	1699
		✓	✓	82 x 60 x 57	C only	12	FW	www.blanco-australia.com	925	1099
✓	✓	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 57	C rec	12	BI	www.fp.com.au	909	2099
		✓	✓	85 x 60 x 58	H or C	12	FW	www.whirlpool.com.au	633	799
		✓	✓	82 x 60 x 57	ns	14	BI	www.asko.com.au	942	1349
✓			✓	85 x 60 x 60	C only	12	FW	www.thinkappliances.com.au	541	1199
		✓	✓	82 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	www.simpson.com.au	842	899
		✓		82 x 60 x 57	C rec	12	FW	www.blanco-australia.com	700	925
✓	✓	✓	✓	58 x 86 x 55	C only	12	BI	www.smeg-australia.com	674	2990
			✓	82 x 60 x 59	C rec	12	BI	www.electrolux.com.au	836	1429
		✓		82 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	BI	www.simpson.com.au	892	689
			✓	81 x 60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	www.bosch.com.au	878	1499
✓	✓	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 60	C rec	12	FW	www.aristonchannel.com	665	1799
	✓		✓	82 x 60 x 57	C rec	12	FW	www.fp.com.au	468	1049
			✓	85 x 60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	www.bosch.com.au	605	1049
		✓	✓	82 x 60 x 57	H or C	13	FW	www.kleenmaid.com.au	932	2299
			✓	85 x 60 x 60	C rec	12	FW	www.fp.com.au	454	899

Newly tested models.

na Not applicable—only has one basket, or in the case of the double Dishdrawer, two separate baskets whose height doesn't affect each other.

ns Not stated.

(A) All the models in the table have the basic white finish except the Fisher & Paykel Dishdrawer D6603M (indium), Ariston LD87 (grey), Electrolux EK500 (stainless steel) and Kleenmaid DW34X (stainless steel). Dishwashers with this footnote also have a version with a stainless steel finish, generally at a slightly higher price. Some also have other versions or types available.

(B) Discontinued but may still be available in some shops.

(C) The Smeg is wider and shorter than a standard dishwasher and only has one basket, but still with 12 place settings.

closing the door, and ease of cleaning. However, both models' detergent flaps are difficult to lift.

- None of the newly tested models rated well for someone with impaired vision, so the recommendation from our last round of testing stands: the WESTINGHOUSE SB915.

- For people with a cognitive impairment, the FISHER & PAYKEL DW60DCW1 and BOSCH Lifestyle Automatic models both rated well for clear controls and simple components.

USING THE TABLE

Scores

- Washing performance: 35%
- Drying performance: 25%
- Ease of use: 10%
- Energy efficiency: 15%
- Water efficiency: 15%

Noise All the dishwashers are fairly quiet, but you'd notice them as background noise if you were in the same room when they were running.

Features For more on the features in the table, see CHOICE, Jan/Feb 2006, or go to choiceextra.com.au and click on that issue under 'dishwashers' in the index.

Anti-flood hose This hose has an electric shut-off near the water tap connection, which means it stops leaks in the hose, not just in the machine. We've previously reported which machines have any kind of anti-flood device, but now almost all machines have some level of protection. An anti-flood hose is high-level protection.

Water connection

- H or C** You can connect the dishwasher to hot or cold water.

- C rec** The manufacturer recommends connection to a cold tap, and the dishwasher heats the water itself (all dishwashers have a heater).

- C only** You can only connect to a cold tap.

Type

- FW** Freestanding, with a worktop (can generally be built-in as well).
- BI** Built-in (mightn't have top or side panels), and will need to be anchored to stop it from tipping over when the baskets are pulled out.

Some models are also available **semi-integrated** (you can fit a front panel to the door to match the rest of your kitchen cupboard doors) or **fully integrated** (the whole front of the machine can match your kitchen, with the controls hidden in the top of the door).

Running costs This is an estimate of how much it'll cost over 10 years for water and electricity if you wash a full load every day using a 'normal' or 'auto-sensing' cycle, based on 15 cents per kWh for electricity and \$1 per 1000 L of water.

Price Recommended retail as of April 2007.

CHOICE campaigns

Unfair contracts — fine print that stings

Life as a consumer used to seem simpler: you paid your money, you got your goods, and you didn't have to sign anything. But now more and more of our purchases involve a contract between you and the seller. When you rent a car, take out a gym membership, purchase an airline ticket or buy a mobile phone, you're signing up to a contract that sets out terms and conditions of use. And you'll find that virtually all these contracts include non-negotiable terms and conditions.

These so-called 'standard terms' — usually published in small print and filled with legal jargon — are rarely included for the benefit of the consumer. Sometimes the contracts include terms that are completely unfair, such as allowing the supplier to vary charges at any time and without notice. When things go wrong, it's the consumer who invariably loses out as a result of these unfair terms.

CHOICE is calling for law reform to improve



TAMARA GRAHAM

your rights in the face of lopsided contracts. 'Unfair contract terms' legislation would give you the right to challenge the consequences of an unfair term affecting you and obtain compensation where justified. It would enable regulatory authorities to force companies to remove unfair contract terms from standard contracts.

CHOICE thinks unfair contract terms should be banned by national laws that apply to all industries. Currently, Victoria is the only state that officially prohibits unfair terms in consumer contracts. The legislation has been used to change contracts in important ways. A Victorian tribunal held that a clause in a phone contract enabling the company to change the contract unilaterally was unfair. The company has now removed the term from the contract.

Unfair contract terms legislation is an essential element of Australia's consumer policy framework. Effective unfair contract laws would decrease the need for detailed consumer protection legislation in some areas. CHOICE is campaigning to persuade Australian governments to introduce unfair contract term legislation as soon as possible. For more information see choice.com.au/unfaircontracts. ■

CAMPAIGN NEWS

TIME TO GET BROADBAND RIGHT

Broadband looks to be a key election issue, with both the Government and the Opposition proposing plans to upgrade the broadband network. CHOICE is concerned that the rush to build this new network could lead to hasty decisions that aren't in the long-term interests of consumers.

Much of the present hype about broadband is overstated. The system used at present, ADSL2+ is adequate for most current needs — most consumers don't use the highest speeds currently available; instead they choose a slower but generally cheaper plan. We need to work towards upgrading broadband, but not at the cost of undermining competition in telecommunications, which could reduce choice and raise prices. In whatever arrangements any government adopts to support or enable a particular broadband investment proposal, consumers must be guaranteed:

- The maximum possible level of competition, in order to maintain the lower prices it's created.
- The best prices and value in both the short and long term.
- Future technology options and growth won't be limited.

• Genuine public consultation.

With such critical and expensive infrastructure, any bad policy decisions made now could still have consequences for Australians in two decades. CHOICE will continue to lobby for the best broadband solutions for Australian consumers. For more information go to choice.com.au/broadband.

ALL WILL BE REVEALED

Pharmaceutical companies now have to publicly reveal details of the functions they sponsor — such as the medical conferences and associated lavish dinners and foreign travel offered to doctors — after the Australian Competition Tribunal upheld a new set of rules for drug companies.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission imposed the rules in July 2006 when Medicines Australia (the drug industry's national association) sought authorisation of its Code of Conduct, which governs the way pharmaceutical companies promote medicines to doctors. CHOICE argued that the code shouldn't be authorised at all, as it was ineffective at preventing unethical drug marketing. The ACCC decided to authorise the code, but only on the condition that details

of functions sponsored by pharmaceutical companies be reported and made public. Medicines Australia sought a review of this finding.

Pharmaceutical companies spend twice as much on marketing their drugs as on researching and developing them. Marketing can influence the way healthcare professionals prescribe medicines, to the extent that more expensive treatments are prescribed. This leads to increased government expenditure on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, ultimately paid for by you — the taxpayer.

The Australian Competition Tribunal decision is a step in the right direction. The Medicines Australia scheme is an ineffective way to regulate marketing — CHOICE wants to see greatly improved monitoring of compliance with the code and increased penalties for breaches. Most fines are around \$25,000 per breach, which isn't much of a deterrent to drug companies considering many of their marketing campaigns are multi-million dollar projects. For more information on CHOICE's campaign on drug marketing, go to choice.com.au/drugmarketing.

RECALLS & bans

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Product Safety Policy section of the ACCC on (02) 6243 1262.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

FOOD San Marino has recalled **San Marino Cacciatori**, hot and mild, use-by-date 09 AUG 07, packaged in a vacuum-sealed cryovac plastic bag, various weights: **San Marino Veneto**, hot and mild, 700 g, use-by-date 09 AUG 07 and 18 AUG 07; and **Sopressa Mild**, 2 kg, use-by-date 16 AUG 07. All products were sold in NSW, SA and Victoria.

The problem They could contain salmonella bacteria.

What to do Don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD Buderim Ginger has recalled **Ginger Classic Australian Ginger Original Marmalade**, 365 g glass jar, best-before date 08 FEB 10.

The problem It may contain glass fragments.

What to do Don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 1800 067 686 for more information.

FOOD Better Choice Fisheries has recalled **Frozen Better Choice Cooked and Peeled Prawns**, 500 g, sealed red plastic bag, use-by-date 18 May 09, batch code 138.1.

The problem Raw prawns have been packed into a bag marked "cooked and peeled prawns". Eating raw prawns may cause illness.

What to do Return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD Arnotts Biscuits has recalled **Kettle Potato Chips**, chilli flavour, 200 g, best-before 12 Sep 07, sold in the NT, SA, Tasmania and Victoria.

The problem They contain dairy and wheat products that aren't declared on the labelling.

What to do Don't eat them if you have an allergy to dairy or wheat products.

BABY CARRIER Watchdog Compliance has recalled **Kathmandu Baby Carrier**, sold at Kathmandu stores since 15 April 2007. It's blue in colour and comes with a detachable storage compartment.

The problem The shoulder strap harness could break under load.

What to do Don't use it. Return it to your nearest Kathmandu store for a refund.

TOY The Axis Brokerage & Trading Co has recalled **Take-Apart Town House** toy, item number 2408808, barcode number 9054308808.

The problem Small magnets used to connect the wooden pieces to the sides of the townhouse can fall out and pose a choking risk to young children.

What to do Remove them from the reach of young children. Call 02 9440 4202 to arrange for collection and a refund.

TOY Mattel has recalled **Fisher-Price Rainforest Open Top Take-Along Swing**, distributed in Australia since January 2007. It's approximately 58 cm tall, and has two carry handles on the left and right sides, with a palm tree mobile and two hanging plush toys. It was sold at Toys R Us and independent nursery retailers.

The problem A baby can shift to one side of the swing and become caught between the swing frame and the seat.

What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Call 1800 674 753, Monday to Friday, 8 am to 4:30 pm EST, to determine if your product is affected, and to arrange for the return of the affected toy.

BLANKET Sheridan has recalled the **Sheridan Indulgence Blanket**, a nylon blanket sold mostly to commercial customers under the Actil brand, but also through Sheridan Factory Outlets between 19 February 2007 and 21 May 2007.

The problem It contains levels of formaldehyde that exceed Sheridan's product specifications and standards.

What to do Return it to the place of purchase for a refund or replacement, or for more information call 1800 625 516.

TELEVISION Sharp has recalled **Sharp LCD television**, model numbers LC42BX5X, LC42GD7X and LC42PD7X, serial numbers 610700001 to 705799999, purchased between 1 February 2007 and 21 May 2007. The serial number can be found on the identification plate on the rear of the television. TVs within the above serial range that have a green dot on the identification plate have already been inspected and modified.

The problem Under certain circumstances a small piece of foam shielding may come free from its mounting and make contact with the power board. This could cause overheating and/or create a live voltage on the frame of the unit, posing the risk of electric shock.

What to do Turn off the TV and disconnect it from the power point. Either go to www.sharp.net.au or call 1800 333 435 between 7 am and 7 pm EST, seven days, to arrange for a free inspection and modification. Have the model and serial number ready before you call.

CONTACT LENS SOLUTION Advanced Medical Optics has recalled **Complete MoisturePLUS contact lens solution**, all batches.

The problem There's some evidence suggesting an association between the product and a rare eye infection.

What to do Stop using the product. The Therapeutic Goods Administration has also recommended replacement of contact lenses and lens storage containers used with this product. If you experience any eye discomfort or irritation, contact your eye care practitioner. For more information call 1800 038 314.

TOOTH PASTE Farmer Charlie Stores has recalled **Excel Toothpaste**, 120 g, sold at Farmer Charlie outlets in Yamba, Evans Head, Lismore and Ballina since March 2007.

The problem It contains a toxic chemical called diethylene glycol.

What to do Don't use it. Return it to any Farmer Charlie store for a refund.

AC ADAPTER Shun Shing Standard Corporation has recalled the Australian plug of the **AC adapter** sold under the brand names **AVLabs**, **Cadpase**, **Elano** and **Gear4**. It was sold in the Apple reseller channel and Harvey Norman, Strathfield group, Myer, Dick Smith and JB Hi Fi between April 2005 and May 2007.

The problem The Australian plug may have a manufacturing defect.

A breakage may occur that could expose the user to live circuitry.

What to do Switch off the power at the power point and disconnect the AC power adapter from the mains power point. Check the label details to see if it's one of the affected plugs. If it is, go to www.plugreplacement.com.au for further information.

CAR Toyota has recalled **Toyota Camry**, models ACV36R and MCV36R, model years June 2002 through to May 2006. The VIN range on the ACV36R is WMI 6T1 VDS 53BK36 VIS 0X000001-0X107554; for the MCV36R it's WMI 6T1 VDS 53BK36 VIS 0X270001-0X321501.

The problem The headlamp switch contact points may corrode over time, causing the headlamps to flicker on low or high beam; it may also cause the headlamps to go out momentarily.

What to do Owners will be contacted by letter, or for more information call your nearest Toyota dealer.

CAR Nissan has recalled **Nissan D40 Navara**, VIN range VSXCLND40A0033906 to VSXCLND40A0184104.

The problem The ID plate (fitted to the LH 8-pillar) may have been stamped with the wrong approval number.

What to do Contact your nearest Nissan dealer to arrange for rectification.

VEHICLE Polaris Industries has recalled **Polaris ATV 2006 Hawkeye**, 2x4 (2A06LB27AA), 4x4 (A06LB27AA/AB/AC), 2x4 Int'l (A06LB27FA) and 4x4 Int'l (06LD27FB), all VINs produced prior to 23 January 2006.

The problem The front bearing carrier castings may have been made with an insufficient amount of material thickness in the area where the lower arm meets the ball joint. The steering posts may also fatigue and break where the handlebar attaches to the steering post.

What to do Contact your nearest Polaris dealer.

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Dishwashers

HOW TO USE THIS INDEX

Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, normal type indicates other articles.

* indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls. For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts and other small pieces.

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speaker docks

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Wine, sparkling
Yoghurt

HARD word

The prize for best entry goes to B Scott for the striner. Thanks also to T Partridge, G Treloar, M Clancy, S Dawkins, N Maher and P Godfrey for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Please don't email us your entries — we need the originals.



When is an infant not an infant?

Infants over 3 years — they're so hard to buy for, and even harder to find!

Sandals, shorts, bare hands...

The sun-worshipper on this blower vac box obviously didn't read the safety instructions.

Additional safety rules for blower vacs

- Always wear adequate protective clothing when operating the tool to avoid injuries to face, eyes, hands, feet, head or hearing. Use safety glasses or a face shield, high boots or sturdy shoes, long trousers, work gloves, a hard hat and ear defenders.



2 Services per day
7 days per week
(excluding Sundays)

2 Services per day
7 days per week
(excluding Sundays)

An eight-day week?

For the Beatles maybe, but for the rest of us, seven is the norm.

UV WRAPS' SAFETY GLASSES are equipped with polycarbonate UV 400 lenses. This medium impact high performance lens has been manufactured to meet all requirements set by Australian/NZS Standard 1337:1996. These eye protectors are intended for indoor and outdoor use, where no optical radiation hazards exist other than solar radiation. They are intended to provide adequate protection against ultraviolet radiation from sun, but are not intended to provide protection against sunglare.

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... but not against faulty labelling.



WARNING:
CHOKING HAZARD—small parts.
Not for children under 3 years.



Phonetics or folly?

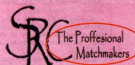
This Chinese-made 'strainer' includes a handy guide to pronunciation for the Strine market.



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We have never changed our name.



Maybe it's time they *did* change their name...



Big blanket — for Barbie

This blanket may be called 'big' — but at 200 mm x 240 mm, it wouldn't even keep a doll warm.